KAMIKAZE Girls

Translated by
Akemi Wegmüller

by Novala Takemoto!

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KAMIKAZE *Girls*

A true Lolita must nurture a Rococo spirit and live a Rococo lifestyle.

Rococo is the name of that supremely elegant and sumptuous era that dominated *la France* in the latter part of the eighteenth century. In art history terms, Rococo refers to the period that appeared after Baroque—which lasted from around 1715 to 1770 or so and possessed a stateliness and majesty based on Catholic beliefs—and without giving it *any* deep thought whatsoever, started using curves for no other reason than, *hey, round is cuter than square!* and, just because the solemn, masculine dynamism of Baroque was sort of oppressive, plus all serious and boring, came up with a decorative style that was fancy, ornate, and feminine—which sounds very nice, but actually it's just terribly frivolous. After enjoying its heyday, Rococo—derived from *rocaille*, or "misshapen pebble" in French (pardon my going academic on you right off the bat; bear with me a little longer, you slower-witted readers out there)—was treated as a blot on the history of art due to its complete lack of thought, ("Shall we just pretend it never happened? It's so stupid." "Yes, let's ignore it.") and buried in oblivion. Consequently, painters of the Rococo period such as Watteau and Boucher are, even today, considered with greater disdain than they deserve as artists.

Just as Rococo is treated in art history as a period everyone would like to forget, the entire era—its fashions, lifestyle, and

everything else—seems to be considered best forgotten by the intelligentsia. Just look at world history textbooks: the sections covering the Rococo period are super-compact, and never very flattering, either. Well, the first person most people mention as the representative character of the Rococo period is Marie Antoinette, who lived in the lap of luxury in Versailles, said "Let them eat cake!" when told her people had no bread—and got denounced for that and turned into a total villain by Hiroshi Kume on *News Station*—earned the wrath of her subjects, and got her head chopped off on the guillotine when those subjects staged a revolution (although the truly representative character of Rococo is Madame de Pompadour, who raised herself from a low social standing, insinuated herself into the upper classes with her wit and beauty, and ultimately became the power behind the throne, controlling King Louis XV from the shadows. In fact, it would be no overstatement to say that her personal tastes and interests were synonymous with Rococo culture), so maybe it can't be helped that Rococo tends to be understood as the antithesis of freedom and equality. But even so, I don't care what anybody might say: I am living the Rococo lifestyle.

Regarding Boucher, who took the Rococo elements that make up the paintings of Watteau, one of the leading Rococo painters, and incorporated them into his works even more lavishly, his contemporary Diderot (I'm not sure what this person did. All I know is that he compiled an encyclopedia. So maybe something like a French Kyosuke Kindaichi? Kindaichi compiled a Japanese dictionary, after all...Well, maybe not.) made the following declaration: "He is morally decadent, does not understand elegance, or know truth, has never seen Nature, and lacks taste." He also said, about Boucher's paintings, that they contain only "elegance, cloying sweetness, fantastic gallantry, coquetry, facility, change, brilliance, made-up

skin tones, and lewdness." So this Diderot person made some terribly contradictory statements, one moment saying Boucher doesn't understand elegance, the next moment saying his paintings are elegant, but regardless, I suppose he basically hated everything that is Rococo. To those who love Rococo, however, his very condemnation of Boucher and of the Rococo culture that he wanted to criticize through his attack on Boucher's paintings reads like praise. Prizing elegance, sweet emotions, and fantasy more than morals and truth; wallowing in fleeting romance rather than trying to give meaning to life, when who knows what's going to happen to you anyway; ignoring virtue and conventions to cherish only the pleasures you are definitely experiencing now: this is the Cocoro of Rococo (a little pun in Japanese, if you please. *Cocoro* means "spirit"). No matter how much deep thought, hard work, and agonizing effort went into coaxing out some insight, if that insight is boring, or not beautiful, it doesn't matter. And even if something is made just for laughs, if you find it pleasing, it has value. Other people's opinions and labor do not figure into your assessment; choosing things with your own personal sense of "I like this, I don't like that" is the ultimate individualism that sustains the very foundation of Rococo. Rococo, therefore, embodies the spirit of punk rock and anarchism more than any philosophy. Only in Rococo—elegant yet in bad taste, extravagant yet defiant and lawless—can I discover the meaning of life.

When a baby is yanked out of the womb, the reason it's crying is that it's angry about being delivered into this hokey world of ours. Eventually, handed the lot of making its way through life with great disappointments, the baby thinks, *if you're saying I have to live in this crazy world, I've got my own ideas. I won't kick up a big fuss now because that's just embarrassing, but I will take the liberty of ignoring the rules for living quietly, and do whatever the hell I want.* And the first time a baby laughs is when it's made

up its mind like that. So when you see a baby laughing for the first time, don't be so easily delighted. Look very carefully, and I'm sure you'll see that as it laughs, the baby's eyes are emitting a piercing gleam. Most people, however, forget that decision over time as they grow up. And before they know it, they are following all the rules and conventions they vowed to ignore. But there exists a small minority of people who do not forget the vow they made when they first laughed. And those people, whether they cause their parents grief, or are condemned to a lifetime of poverty, or anything else, have no choice but to pursue a Rococo lifestyle to the end of their days.

Lolita is defined as a type of street fashion known only in Japan. But for me, Lolita goes far beyond fashion and serves as my unwavering, absolute personal policy. Wearing a frilly blouse, a skirt over a huge ruffly petticoat with my waist squeezed into a corset, and a totally outlandish headdress, is my way of pledging that I have devoted myself to Rococo. If I didn't dress in this totally conspicuous and bizarre way, I'd make friends and be popular with boys...is what people tell me, and the more they say that, the more it fans the flames of my Lolita passion and stiffens my resolve to be a Lolita through and through.

The Rococo period, from what I've gathered reading books and looking at paintings, was outrageous. The heights that we, discriminated against today for being Lolitas, could never reach no matter how hard we tried, were easily attained by the aristocratic ladies of the Rococo era. They would tighten their corsets as far as they could go and make their waists almost impossibly tiny, but then would be unable to stay standing for very long. The smallest shock would make it difficult for them to breathe, and they'd faint and have to be carried off. This was even considered attractively ladylike. And this was the kind of ideal that dominated the Rococo period! We're talking about

a time when ladies would pile their hair higher and higher in elaborate hairstyles, and top that off with a huge hat, occupying their servants for hours and hours in the process, only to have their height doubled as a result, so that even on their knees they couldn't get through the doorways of their mansions and would have to miss the very party they'd planned on attending in the first place. This rather foolish behavior occurred all the time in the Rococo era, and the aforementioned Diderot probably scoffed at it as ridiculous frippery beyond the bounds of reason, but those who possess the Rococo spirit can only applaud with admiration. Does being reasonable guarantee happiness? Even if it does, isn't that happiness achieved only by enduring all kinds of things? Well, if I have to endure anything, I'd rather be unhappy. Because we Rococophiles know there is no greater unhappiness than the simple fact of being born.

Rococo is also called a wanton age, when elegance was used as an excuse to value pleasure above all else. Ooh, don't say "wanton," it sounds so vulgar! It is true, however, that from the vantage point of hardworking people today, the life of a noble lady in the Rococo era seems considerably decadent. An ordinary day for a Rococo lady went according to the following schedule:

Generally, you wake up around eleven o'clock in the morning. The little puppy you keep in your room starts barking, so you languidly scoop him up onto the bed and, rubbing your eyes, play with him for a while. When you get tired of that, you finally get out of bed, crack open the drapes to see what the weather is like, and let them fall closed again. Then you ring for your maidservant. As you sit there sipping the tea she brings you, still half in a daze, another maidservant appears. Now that you have two maids there, it's time to get dressed. First they slip off your negligee and put you in a dressing gown—you do absolutely nothing yourself—and when they've done that, even

though you aren't ill or anything, they each take one of your shoulders and slowly drag you to the makeup chamber. Then they leisurely start making up your face, and when they're finally done with that, you move on to your dressing room and choose what you're going to wear. Then it's time for a meal. After that, all you do until the sun sets is go on walks, play card games (which sounds very ladylike, but we're talking about gambling, folks, gambling!), ride horses, go boating, and so on. At night, you attend concerts and plays, or amuse yourself with dancing. Of course, you take a meal at some point, spending a lot of time at the table, greedily feasting on large helpings of all kinds of delicious things. Deeper into the night, you do the nasty. For people of the Rococo era, doing the nasty was not shameful, but more like a game, or even a kind of sport. And then it was time to go to sleep. Certainly one could call this a decadent, lazy lifestyle—but would you not agree that this is also a truly aesthetic way of life?

All kinds of amusements came into fashion among the people of the Rococo era, and of these, embroidery was quite the rage. For ladies of the nobility, embroidery, along with reading, had been popular from before the Rococo period as something one could do to occupy oneself when alone, but once into Rococo times, for some reason it enchanted the lords as well. It is said that Rococo was an age when men suddenly became feminized, in dress and other ways too, but even so, it's pretty funny to imagine noble gentlemen of honor with beards spending their few moments away from political and military affairs bent over an embroidery hoop, meticulously putting in stitches. "Hey, Lord Simon, I've mastered the double blanket stitch!" "Wow, Lord Saxon. I'm so ham-fisted, I can't even get the backstitch right." "Bring your embroidery hoop and needles over to my place after the next fox hunt. Don't forget your chalk either. I'll teach you." "Gee, thanks. Hey, I know...How about forming a

sewing circle with a few of the guys?" "That sounds smashing." "But let's keep this a secret from the womenfolk. And even if they do find out, no dames allowed, because women aren't serious enough. Oh, and how about in summer we do an intensive workshop?" Aah, Rococo—what a silly age it was. But 'tis a fine line between silliness and supreme beauty, no more than a hair's breadth wide.

So anyway, Rococophile that I am, I have been studying embroidery ever since middle school. Happening to join the craft club was what started me off, but the process of working alone in silence, fastidiously completing a piece one stitch at a time, suited me greatly. Once I entered high school I discovered Lolitahood and developed an interest in Rococo. When I found out that embroidery had been a big fad in the Rococo era, my own passion for needlework went into overdrive. It may sound immodest, but I'd say my embroidery skills now are quite considerable.

Another thing that was popular in the Rococo period, in spite of the fact that people pursued a very artificial kind of beauty in dress and lifestyle, was to cultivate a yearning for nature, such as fields and forests, and to leave the city on holidays to spend some time in the countryside. Although most of the year they lived in Versailles or Paris, the Rococo aristocracy considered it very elegant to while away a few months at a time in a provincial château and forget about city affairs. So they would retreat to the countryside, but not to lead a rustic lifestyle by any means. They brought into their châteaux the same amount of furniture, effects, clothing, and servants to which they were accustomed in the city. They would wear their skirts over enormous pan-

niers, decorate the hair piled high on their heads with flowers and feathers, carry a fan in their left hand and a parasol in their right, and sashay around the countryside with an entourage of servants. For the farmers working the fields these visitors may have been nothing but an annoyance, but since they built their châteaux on land they owned, the fields belonged to them too, and the farmers were in no position to complain. This return to nature (?), or at the very least a love of the countryside, was considered at the time very intellectual, and cultivated people all vied with each other in flocking to the provinces.

When I imagine the grassy fields spreading out like a green carpet, with thick forests far away on the horizon, and envision the outrageously decorated appearance of those ladies, so totally unsuited to life in the country, as they wend their way among the fields, I see how beautiful that was in a way that goes against God's wishes. I realize this is the ultimate in perverted, artificial beauty, and sigh with rapture. A different time it may be in which I live, but I too possess the Rococo spirit. I ought to be able to descend upon the countryside decked out in full Lolita fashion, and carry it off as an act of elegance. However. Ah, however. Why does reality have to be so cruel? I'm wearing a red Elizabethan-style dress that has a frilly four-tiered skirt, princess sleeves that open really wide at the end (with lots of lace trim), and a rose-shaped lace doily sewn into the middle of the bodice, the white frills of the dress gorgeously setting off the red material while giving a very special and cute impression, and even though the outfit is adorable enough without it, a detachable lace cape for good measure. A red felt mini-hat accented with rose-shaped burnout lace is perched on my hair, which is styled in a princess cut with long ringlets, and I have on frilly white over-the-knee socks. So aside from my shoes, which are Vivienne Westwood's Rocking Horse Ballerinas and Lolita must-haves (they go with any Lol-

ita outfit), I am clad head-to-toe in my darling Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. With my mind and spirit in full Rococo flower, I stroll through the countryside that lies between my house and the train station, but no matter how long I walk, I just can't get into a Rococo mood.

For this is Shimotsuma, a hick town in Ibaraki prefecture. Trying to see this too-rustic hinterland as the French provinces is quite simply impossible. The main road that leads straight to the station does indeed have fields on either side of it, but it's a lonely asphalt road where only cars and trucks occasionally pass at high speed. There is nothing picturesque about it. I could put on airs and call it "pastoral," but rather than pastures, the fields around me are plain old rice paddies. These stretch out forever and ever, and I can narrow my eyes all I want, but they will never look the tiniest bit like a green carpet. Instead, they spread out with all the swagger of a bona-fide primary industry. I can walk and walk and walk, and it's just rice paddies. Everywhere I look, rice paddies. In every direction, rice paddies. From corner to corner, rice paddies. Aah, it's enough to drive you crazy: rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies. And then more rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies. From top to bottom, rice paddies. Past, present, and future, rice paddies. All of creation, just rice paddies. There are a few vegetable fields, actually, but basically it's rice paddies. Let me catch my breath for a second. Okay, this might seem repetitious, but I haven't done it justice yet: rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies— I'm faintly hoping they'll turn into nice laddies, or rich daddies, or anything else eventually, but not a chance. I'm telling you, this place is just endlessly, mindlessly, senselessly, hopelessly, bound-lessly surrounded by rice paddies and that is it.

When I walk along beside these rice paddies in full Baby, the Stars Shine Bright regalia, some old granny bent over at the

waist with a towel around her head will inevitably raise her head from her fieldwork, stare intently at me and ask, "Was there some carnival going on today?" And then, every time, I am forced to explain that no, there is no carnival going on that day. The Lolita look may go very well with the European countryside, but it does not suit the paddy fields of Japan the least bit.

Shimotsuma, this country town where I have come to live, is so rural it makes you want to faint. You simply can't get anywhere from here. When I first heard we were moving to Ibaraki, in my heart I pumped my fist into the air. The reason for this is that, until then, I was living in Amagasaki in Hyogo prefecture. Would you be familiar with Amagasaki? It is an extremely sketchy place. Located at the border of Osaka and Hyogo prefectures, it's more or less urban without being a real city. The problem is with the quality of its urbanization. Most residents are Yanki or former Yanki. The majority of Amagasaki citizens are born in Amagasaki, raised by former Yanki who were born and raised in Amagasaki, and as a natural progression, turn into Yanki themselves. So the shopping areas of Amagasaki are quite lively, but all the businesses are either pachinko parlors or shops selling fake brand-name clothing. Eateries are all very cheap, and you can easily find places selling a bowl of ramen noodles for a hundred yen. All the restaurants in town, including barbecue joints (for some reason, extremely numerous), are out to win customers by slashing their prices. This makes it sound like Amagasaki is a very dynamic place, but that is incorrect. Amagasaki entrepreneurs can think only of one way to make a business succeed, and that is to undercut the competition. And Amagasaki consumers also have no interest in anything besides cheap prices. Quality and added value mean nothing to the people of Amagasaki. When mad-cow disease was hitting the headlines, I found out from seeing the news that barbecue restaurants all over Japan

were going out of business, but you would never know that in Amagasaki, where cheap barbecue joints had people spilling out the doors. It would never occur to them to think *uh-oh, since the meat we're eating is so incredibly cheap, maybe...* (Well, I suppose if they saw the news they might think about it. Which means the people of Amagasaki do not watch the news. And the only papers they read are the sports tabloids.) Most of the people crowding the shopping arcades are dressed in tracksuits. This is entirely normal in Amagasaki. People born in Amagasaki grow up, get married, have children, and die wearing tracksuits. And although Amagasaki is in Hyogo prefecture, for some reason its area code is the 06 of Osaka. Amagasaki citizens think of this as a lucky break, because they get to make local calls to Osaka when they don't even live there, but I have mixed feelings about it. Hyogo is centered around Kobe and includes the ritzy neighborhoods of Ashiya, so it has long tried to cultivate a high-society image. Therefore, the way I read it, Hyogo does not want to recognize Tracksuit City as one of its own. If it could, it would take the first opportunity to shove Amagasaki into rowdy, anything-goes Osaka prefecture and solidify its own brand image—is my interpretation of Hyogo's true sentiments. And that's why they quietly overlook the fact that its area code is 06. If Osaka prefecture said, "Hey, about Amagasaki. Could we have it?" I'm quite sure Hyogo would hand it right over, no questions asked. So I had a pretty big complex about the fact that I had been born and raised in this place. When I'd go shopping, for example—since naturally there was nothing I'd want to buy in Amagasaki, I always went out to Umeda in Osaka—I would almost die of embarrassment when I was getting something on layaway and had to write my address down. Just by writing "Amagasaki," I got the feeling everyone was looking at me with deeply prejudiced, and also pitying, eyes. It felt like they were snootily

thinking, *Oh sure, you're dressed in those cute clothes, but you're just a visitor from Tracksuit Land.*

To buy Baby, the Stars Shine Bright clothing, I would either go to a store called Maria Teresa in the EST-1 shopping center in Umeda, which also stocked Jane Marple, Milk, and other Lolita-style brands, or go to the Baby, the Stars Shine Bright website and buy them online. Baby, the Stars Shine Bright only operated one store of its own, and that was in Daikanyama in Tokyo. So when I heard we were moving to Ibaraki, that's why I got so excited, because Ibaraki is right next to Tokyo and I thought I'd be able to make day trips to their boutique. My fantasies stretched almost to the bursting point, like a bullfrog's inflated cheeks. But then I got to Shimotsuma, and it was rice paddies, rice paddies, rice paddies: complete and total boondocks. It's possible to make a day trip to Baby's boutique in Daikanyama, but only if you devote your entire day to the excursion.

So near, and yet so far. When I discovered this fact, I suffered a slight attack of dizziness. If I was going to be stuck here, living in Yanki-dominated Amagasaki was a thousand times more convenient. I mean to say, really! Walking from our house in the Yokone district to Shimotsuma station takes thirty minutes, at the very least. If you race-walk, twenty minutes. There is a bus, but—are you ready for this?—only two times a day, once in the morning and once in the evening. Then, when you finally reach Shimotsuma station, getting from there to Tokyo requires a mind-boggling amount of time and labor. This is why most people in Shimotsuma have a driver's license. High school students all have scooter licenses. Without this, you simply cannot get around in Shimotsuma. People who don't have car or scooter licenses own a bicycle, the majority of them your average "mommy-bike" or shopping bicycle. This is also a must-have item for Shimotsuma students. But I do not ride mommy-

bikes. I will never, ever ride anything like a mommy-bike. So, whenever I need to get to the station area, I give myself thirty minutes and set out on foot, trudging past the fields—ahem—the plain old rice paddies on either side of the main road.

Shimotsuma is not an island, but I think of this as an exile such as Napoleon's on Elba. Amagasaki was a junk city, but at least it was on the major train routes, so I could go to Kobe and Osaka quite easily. If you want to get from Shimotsuma station to Tokyo, first you have to take the local Joso line to Toride. There are only two trains an hour, and these are just one car long, of all things, and operated by the driver alone—no conductor or anything. And I discovered that, among the stations along the Joso line, Shimotsuma is positively deluxe in its accoutrements. Many of the stations along the Joso line, whose trains rattle along through the rice paddies at tortoise speed, look like simple bus stops with nothing more than a basic roof over them. Unless you're a local, you'd never even guess that these deserted little shelters were train stations in the first place. They look more like those roadside produce stands where you stick a hundred yen in the jar for a bunch of carrots. In comparison, Shimotsuma station is magnificent. It actually has a turnstile you have to pass through to reach the platform, and a waiting room in the ticket vending area, and benches, and even a kiosk! (What am I boasting about? It's par for the course that a station has a kiosk. Don't tell me I'm starting to go native??? Eek, yuck, heeeelp!) Next to the kiosk is a soba noodle counter where only about three customers can be served at one time. This soba stand does quite a brisk trade, but when the soba stand is doing a brisk trade, you can't buy anything at the kiosk. Yes, you perceptive readers have already figured it out. The woman who runs the kiosk also operates the soba stand. So that's the Joso line, and without taking it to Toride station, you cannot get to Tokyo. The ride from Shimotsuma to Toride takes about

one hour. Once you reach Toride, you have to change to the Joban line, which takes you to Tokyo's Ueno station. Even with an express train, the ride from Toride to Ueno lasts about forty minutes. So when you factor in the time you spend waiting for trains, you need to give yourself a good two and a half hours to get from Shimotsuma to Ueno.

My loser dad told me that Ibaraki is next to Tokyo, so I could easily swing out to the big city whenever I felt like it. And I thought, *That's rather marvelous—good-bye Kansai, good-bye Amagasaki! I have no regrets leaving this sorry place,* and, picturing myself strolling down Omotesando Avenue in Tokyo, looked forward to our move with eagerness. Well, *that* was a load of bullshit, you lying bastard. Ibaraki may be located next to Tokyo on the map, but once you've set up house in a place like Shimotsuma, you need at least two and a half hours to get there. That's the same amount of time it takes to get from Osaka to Tokyo on the bullet train, asshole. It's true the fare from Shimotsuma to Tokyo costs about one-tenth of taking the bullet train from Osaka, but that is not the issue. The issue is, while the kiosk lady is boiling noodles at the soba counter next door, I cannot buy Cool Mint gum at the kiosk. (Oops, maybe not.)

Thanks to this move, a dark curtain was abruptly thrown over the glorious springtime of my life. This is all the Loser's fault. I live with a Rococo spirit, so I would like to call my father "Daddy" or "Papa" or something stylishly foreign-sounding like that. I would like it very much, but calling him something like that tugs at my conscience. "Daddy" is definitely out of the question, and even "Papa" is deceptive for my

useless parent. Even "Father" is out for that clown. "Pa" would probably suit him best, but where does that leave *me*? So I'm afraid I'll have to call him "the Loser," if you don't mind.

The Loser was a loser from the time I was born. He was born in Amagasaki and, as a matter of course, grew up as a Yanki. After dropping out of high school he took up work as a plasterer and construction worker, but being lazy through and through, never lasted very long at any of his jobs. He'd lay around drinking cheap liquor all day, and whenever he managed to scrape some cash together he'd either go to a pachinko parlor or the boat races, idling away his life in the typical loser manner. He always said that no matter what he tried it wasn't for him, and frankly he hated sweating away doing hard work—but the day he turned twenty, he realized this attitude just wasn't going to cut it if he was going to make his way in this world. With firm resolve, he told himself he was now officially an adult: it was time to get serious about working hard and applying himself. So he knocked on the door of a yakuza office in Amagasaki and sought employment as a gangster. Vowing to apply himself and then applying for a job with the yakuza is precisely what makes the Loser such a loser, but even so, for a while he worked pretty hard as a low-level goon, going around collecting money from bookies, procuring tickets for scalpers, and so on. It was around this time that the Loser met my mother, a hostess in some cheapo cocktail lounge he frequented, and married her. Predictably enough—and while it led to my own birth, it pains me to say this—it was a shotgun wedding.

Suddenly saddled with wife and child in one fell swoop, the Loser felt the heavy weight of responsibility land on his shoulders. He was now the head of a household, and staying a lowly goon wasn't going to bring much in earnings—he needed to make a lot of money and let his family live in style, is what he thought, in classic loser fashion. This, however, was the source

of our troubles. He started skimming off small amounts of the money he collected from the bookies, instead of handing it all over to the yakuza. His embezzlement was promptly discovered, and after being beaten to a pulp, the Loser was told he'd face the standard yakuza punishment of having his little finger chopped off. But when he thrust his left pinkie out and felt the blade of the knife on it, the Loser started bawling. "I-if you chop off my pinkie, I-I won't be able to play the piano anymore!" It goes without saying that he had never laid his fingers on a keyboard in his life. I have no idea where he came up with this preposterous line, of all the things to say at a time like that, but he was so pathetic, blubbering "the piano...the piano..." and even wetting himself in his terror, that the gangsters were probably flabbergasted with disgust. The pinkie-chop was abruptly called off as a special case, and the only penalty the Loser was given was to be expelled from the gang, his little finger still intact.

Fired even by the yakuza, for a while he went back to the loser lifestyle of drinking from the morning, pilfering cash from his wife's purse to go gambling, losing all the money, coming home, and starting all over again, or actually, starting from even lower than before. However, there was a praiseworthy individual who troubled to concern himself with this hopeless loser. This was an older yakuza who'd looked out for him in the gang. Unable to stand seeing the depths to which the Loser had sunk, this mentor found him some work. The work entailed selling fake brand-name goods, and while I'm not familiar with the details, apparently this meant the Loser was working as a sub-contractor to the gang from which he'd been expelled. The gang would tell him what to make, and he would go to some factory somewhere and place an order, saying make this-or-that counterfeit at this price, in this quantity, and by this date. When the items were ready, the Loser would

pick them up, paying the factory out of his own pocket. And then he would sell them, using various distribution routes. He had to pay the gang a percentage on the number of items made, regardless of whether they sold or not. So, for example, if the gang told him to make a hundred phony brand-name bags, and he placed the order according to their instructions and paid for the bags with his own money, if only fifty of the bags sold, that was not considered a surplus order on the gang's part but a lack of salesmanship on the Loser's, and he would still have to pay the duty on all one hundred bags. No matter how you looked at it, this was a thankless business—but the Loser was in no position to pick and choose. First he took out a loan to get some capital, and then he settled into the career of being a bootlegger. Most of the things he was instructed to order and sell were bogus Versace goods.

All counterfeit items, no matter what they are, infringe copyrights and therefore are illegal, but basically there are two main types. One is what you often read about in the news: the "super-copy" made in Korea or Taiwan, usually, which resembles the original in every detail, from the materials used down to the finishing touches, so that even professionals will find it hard to tell whether it's the real thing or an imitation. The other type simply uses a fashion brand's logo or symbol, or something very close to it, and sticks it onto products the brand itself does not make, but which the bootlegger assumes to be more or less in line with that brand's image. These are very casually made products. Naturally, the Loser dealt in the latter type, and his merchandise was hopelessly hit-or-miss. The "super-copy" is made to be mistaken by buyers as being the real thing, so even tags, labels, and boxes are faithfully reproduced. By contrast, the other type of fake is handled and sold in a thoroughly slipshod manner: just make sure the logo and symbol are really big, and other than that, anything goes.

Once the Loser got the hang of the business, he made signs that said "Office Ryugasaki Inc." and pasted these on our apartment door and mailbox (sad to say, the lettering was done by hand for lack of money). The "Inc." was there just because he thought it looked good—his business certainly wasn't incorporated, and the Loser didn't even know what "incorporated" meant. He would always leave huge amounts of various bogus items around the house, sitting in the cardboard boxes in which they'd been packed at the factory. And he managed to do a pretty steady trade. Since unsold merchandise could not be returned, the risk of absorbing losses himself no doubt served to spur him at least somewhat toward serious labor. Stores and foreigners' street stalls did most of the selling for him, fully aware the products were fakes, but apparently they couldn't get rid of everything. In such cases, the Loser would take the leftover merchandise and open a street stall himself, without a permit of course, in front of Amagasaki station.

"Versace, ladies and gentlemen, famous brand-name sweaters for just two thousand yen apiece! These bags over here, just a thousand five hundred. Hey, sweetie, you know Versace, don't you? Buy this in a regular store, it'll cost you ten times what I'm asking. I got a special supply route, see, so I can make it real affordable, just for you. This is the real thing, honey, imported straight over from France." That's right: the Loser didn't even know that Versace, whose products he claimed to be selling, was an Italian brand. Despite his sloppy salesmanship, people bought the stuff since it was cheap. In any other town, if you set up a stall and started shouting, "Versace, straight from France!" you'd be laughed off the street, but in Amagasaki it worked. People might know that Versace was an import brand, but they couldn't care less if it was Italian, French, or English, for the citizens of Amagasaki are truly broad-minded.

Even if the back of a sweater was printed with an enormous

Versace logo, if you looked at the label you'd see that it said "G.V.ERSACE." In other words, the Loser had a flimsy excuse ready: *Sure, this might look like a Versace product, but it's not—it's made by G.V.ERSACE, see?* A fat lot of good it would have done him, for his merchandise was clearly in violation of trademark laws. The police didn't bother cracking down every time someone sold this kind of stuff in such piddling quantities, but if they did, it was obvious he'd be arrested.

Around the time the Loser was frantically hawking bogus merchandise, my mother suddenly left home. I remember it was the spring I started first grade. Some time later, divorce papers arrived in the mail, with my mother's name and signature. Just as the Loser was saying, "What the hell is this? Cuz if it's a joke, it ain't funny," my mother called. The Loser raged furiously into the phone, shouting like mad. And when he finally hung up, he turned to me and said, "Your ma's gone and run off with another man. She wants a divorce, says she never wants to see me again. Turns out she's been sneaking around behind my back with this guy for seven years already. And now that you're in school, she's up and decided it's okay to take off. The other guy's supposed to be doing pretty good financially, a lot better'n me anyway. She says he's got a good job, and a future, a real dependable guy. Man, just when this business was starting to go pretty good, too. Wonder what the problem was. Well, anyway, she's sayin' I ain't got what it takes to give you an education, so she wants you to go live with her and her new husband. Lord, that woman just wants to take away every single thing I got."

The Loser looked and sounded so miserable as he related the conversation to me, it was hard to believe this was the same man who had been ranting and raving into the phone a moment before.

"Something like this hits you outta the blue, you don't know what to think. But I guess she's been planning to do this for a

long time, so it's pretty sure she ain't coming back. What'll you do, kid? You wanna go live with your ma? The other guy's supposed to be a doctor. Well, sure he's gotta be richer'n me, with a solid job like that."

Why did I not then abandon the Loser, and go live with my mother? Even at that tender age, I could see that the Loser had not turned into a loser due to circumstance, but had been born into this world carrying loser genes, with no choice but to live the typical loser life and then to die, a loser to the end. It was evident that to stick around as a member of his family would surely bring some kind of misfortune upon me, and that to leave him was the best course available. Because wretchedness is contagious. If asked whether I felt love, or even an attachment, for the Loser as his child, I would be extremely hard put to answer. It may sound very cold-hearted, but I don't think I ever felt anything for him as a father. Even so, this is what I told him: "I'll stay with you, Dad." It wasn't that I felt sorry for him, far from it. Ever since I can remember there's been a part of me that's oddly indifferent, for some reason. I almost never cried as a child, nor did I wallow in emotion. If you showed me images of a flock of wild birds dying from pollution, I'd think, *so what*? And if I saw a classmate crying for being taunted about coming from a single-parent home, I'd think, *the ones doing the taunting are stupid, teasing someone for such a meaningless reason, but the one who's crying is stupid too—they should be stronger*. Sometimes, even I think I'm a little too unfeeling, but that is my character and I cannot change it. I am simply a heartless person.

A few days later, my mother came to see me at school. "Your dad's being real pigheaded and says he won't let you go, but I want you to come live with me and your new father, for your sake too. You stay with that man, you're going to suffer. Plain as the nose on my face, you're gonna end up unhappy."

I was fully aware of that.

"I know you don't want to leave him all by himself, and I think that's real sweet of you. But I'm telling you, that man is hopeless. No matter what he does, it's always half-baked. Lady Luck doesn't even know he's alive. There are people like that. But your new daddy's a wonderful man, and I just know you'll think so too. He never gets drunk and rowdy, he doesn't gamble...He's got a big heart, and he's as nice as can be. Tell you the truth, I can't really figure out why someone like that fell in love with little old me. I mean, here I'm married, I only got through middle school, I used to be a hostess...There's got to be lots more suitable young ladies for him out there. I'm really happy and all, but even now, sometimes I start wondering if he's fooling with me or something. You know? So I'm scared about getting divorced. I mean, what if the moment I got divorced, he tells me it was all a big joke and he was just testing me to see how serious I'd get? I keep thinking he might dump me."

It turned out that, apparently, the doctor she wanted to marry was the gynecologist who delivered me. Although they had been attracted to each other throughout her pregnancy, as doctor and patient they knew their feelings could not be acknowledged and had sheathed them in a protective covering. One day, however, this covering was abruptly pulled away: my mother had gone into labor, was wheeled into the delivery room and set on the delivery table, and found herself alone with the doctor for a moment. As she shrieked, "Doctor, doctor!" and her face twisted with pain, the doctor stifled her cries by placing his lips over hers. My mother, suppressing her agony, wrapped her arms around the doctor's shoulders and sought a more passionate kiss. And ever since, the two of them had, with some misgivings, raced down the path of adultery.

"He said he'd wait for us to get married until you started going to school. He was thinking about your feelings too, see. He said he wanted to marry me right away, but I should stay

with my husband and carry out my duties as a mother until you started school." As my mother's gynecologist, this doctor had seen me, ugly as a monkey and not even his own child, emerging from the most private part of the woman he loved—in other words, he had witnessed a rather grotesque spectacle. And even so, his ardor had not cooled. As a human being, this person was on a different level, indeed standing on a completely different stage, than the Loser. I knew very well that choosing this new family would be a great advantage for me. Even so, I wanted to try life with the Loser. It just seemed that, even though I'd surely get mixed up in all kinds of trouble, there would be lots of laughs as well. It simply seemed more fun.

"I wish you a lot of happiness with your new husband. I'm very grateful for his willingness to have me live with you, but I think that on top of being divorced, bringing a child along to your new marriage would be a real drawback for you. If Dad gets difficult and says he won't agree to the divorce, I'll persuade him for you." When I said this, deliberately using polite language as if I were talking to a stranger, my mother burst into tears. "Maybe I won't get divorced, after all. Maybe I'll give up on marrying him. There's no way I could live apart from you and enjoy a better life all by myself." To my fretfully weeping mother I said, "If someone's walking in the hills and discovers a seam of gold, I think if they walk away without digging it, they're just stupid. When something that lucky happens to you, thinking it's unfair for you to strike it rich all by yourself doesn't mean you're selfless. When great happiness unexpectedly swoops down on people, they suddenly turn into cowards. Snatching happiness takes a lot more courage than enduring unhappiness. When you find something precious, you have to hold on to it with all your might and never let it go, whatever else you may lose. After all, there are lots of people who die without ever finding something that's really precious to them.

So don't blow your big chance."

When I finished speaking, I turned my back on my mother and started walking away. What a classy thing for a first-grader to say, and to her own mother at that! I turned over the words of my speech in my head as I slowly made my way home, thinking I was pretty hot stuff. *That last "don't blow your big chance" was really good, the way it sounded like a killer phrase from a movie or something. Having that cool one-liner at the end made the preachy part before it really come alive. But delivering it with my backpack on was kinda lame—maybe took the impact out of it?* Analyzing my speech in this manner as I left my mother behind, I was quite probably destined to become a worthless, unpleasant adult. Still, what kind of gynecologist falls in love with his pregnant patient? And kisses her for the first time when she's lying on the delivery table, writhing in pain and about to give birth any second? I mean, come on, the entire situation is patently absurd, right? I must say, I find romance among grown-ups quite baffling.

Once he signed the divorce papers, I was sure the Loser would fall apart at the seams, taking to drink and gambling because that's how he's made, but contrary to all expectations, and in spite of going bar-hopping quite a lot, he began working quite hard, indeed approaching his job with greater zeal and dynamism than ever before. He started researching what sorts of products other bootleggers were handling and going to the yakuza with proposals of his own, telling them that such-and-such an item was selling well, so how about producing the same thing with a Versace logo on it?

The Loser's proposals were totally outrageous. Versace fans, Versace stickers, Versace pencil cases, Versace mouse pads—these were things Versace wouldn't even make by mistake, but the Loser was telling the yakuza they would sell if only they'd let him produce them. It seems that, although he said

he was researching fellow fake-goods merchants, instead of visiting stores selling phony Chanel and Louis Vuitton, he had been snooping around shops targeting kids, where photos of teen idols were illicitly plastered on all kinds of trinkets. His focus was so off the mark he could have been a frog instead of a human being, and I remember thinking at the time that this guy might actually be quite extraordinary. The Loser's suggestions passed muster with unexpected ease (amazing that the yakuza went for such cockeyed ideas), and bright red fans and mouse pads sporting the Versace logo in gold lettering were duly produced. *Who'd buy these things? This is going to be a total flop*, I thought as I watched the enterprise coldly, but they seemed to be selling well enough. When I entered middle school, I discovered Yanki classmates proudly flashing around the Loser's Versace pencil cases and stickers, and I remember realizing for the first time that there was indeed a niche market for his wares. However, while ordinarily one would enjoy bragging to one's classmates that the items they were using were produced by one's father, sadly enough these were illegal fakes, so I had to keep quiet about that fact and watch the Yanki using the bogus Versace items with mixed feelings. One time, I heard one of them saying, "Dude, get a load of my brand-name pencil case. Pretty cool, huh? It's, like, totally expensive. We're talking Versace, after all. Made in France and everything." *Sigh*. The Loser still thought Versace was a French brand. He was taking this stuff to stores and telling them it was made in France, and the shopkeepers were swallowing it hook, line, and sinker, so that consumers were purchasing this Japanese-made Versace stuff as French-made Versace stuff. Thanks to the Loser's ignorance, large numbers of Amagasaki citizens were going through life with the misconception that Versace was a French brand. When I thought about this, I felt a twinge of guilt. (But at the same time, I couldn't believe nobody noticed. How come

nobody busted in with, "But Versace's Italian!"? These people were too gullible.)

However, there would eventually be a high price to pay for lounging insolently on top of this gullibility and continuing to produce excessively bogus wares. Around the time I started high school, Universal Studios Japan opened in Osaka. The birth of a major amusement park that could rival Tokyo Disneyland (which is in Chiba, to be precise) had the people of Kansai, led by Osakans, in a mad frenzy of excitement. Traditional Japanese sweets shops took the liberty of selling "E.T." bean-jam cakes, while sushi places started serving up such delights as "Jaws sushi." Merchants eyeing to get rich quick off of visitors to USJ, as it was soon universally known, sprang up like mushrooms after a spring rain. None of the wares they produced had been licensed by Universal Studios, so be they bean-jam cakes or sushi, in the broad sense of the word they were all fakes. As a veteran bootlegger and president of Office Ryugasaki Inc. (in actual fact, neither the "Inc." nor the "president" is correct. On his business card, his title was given as "representative director." Not only that, but while ordinarily the title is printed in small letters, the Loser's business card had "representative director" in letters almost as big as his name. As a result of which, the card had almost no blank space left.), there was no way the Loser wasn't going to jump on the bandwagon and come up with USJ-related products.

What he did was put in an order for bold, or rather, over-the-top, or should I say, out-of-control—perhaps even surreal—merchandise: tracksuits, T-shirts, baseball caps, and other products printed with the USJ symbol on the front, under which was emblazoned the logo, "Universal Studios Japan," under which came the Versace logo. If he was going to make fake USJ products, it would have been enough to use the USJ symbol and logo—so what was that Versace logo doing there? Although

the taste and sensibility that decided this was completely beyond my comprehension, the single hard-and-fast rule of thumb that the Loser had learned in the bootleg business was, apparently, that so long as you put a Versace logo on something, it would sell. For the Loser, the Versace logo was magic, the be-all and end-all for achieving business success (in which case, how about studying up on Versace a little, you dope?).

With regard to this idea of teaming up Universal Studios Japan and Versace, even the mobsters balked. In response to his yakuza patron's protest of "Ain't USJ alone enough? Why you gotta put that Versace on there too? I mean, Universal Studios and Versace ain't got a damn thing to do with each other," the Loser threw out his chest and responded, "Uh-uh. You just don't get it. Stuff with just the USJ symbol and logo on it, even your average Joe is turning out that kinda stuff these days. Something that simple just ain't gonna sell. See, I've been in the apparel business for a while now, so I'm really on top of what's hot in the fashion trade. And I'm telling you, it's all about dual branding these days. Young people can't get enough of it. You know what I'm talking about? I bet you don't. Dual branding, see, is where you got a big-name shoe maker and a big-name clothing maker, say, coming up with some product together. You know how all the big banks are merging and gettin' those long names these days? Well, I'm telling you, dual branding is all the rage right now. And that's why I'm saying we oughta make dual-brand products with USJ and Versace. I promise you, this is gonna sell big-time. Ain't nobody else thought of pairing Universal Studios and Versace, so this is gonna be so fresh, the customers are gonna go nuts over it."

Where on earth had the Loser heard of dual branding? Oh, I know—I bet he sneaked a peek at one of the haute-couture magazines I buy. There was no other explanation whatsoever for how a phrase like "dual branding" could have worked its

way into the Loser's brain. And going around brazenly saying he's "in the apparel business," for goodness' sake. It's true he was dealing in clothing, but could you really call what he does "the apparel business"? As for boasting that the idea of dual branding Universal Studios Japan and Versace was so "fresh" because "nobody else had thought of it," well, who'd come up with something as screwy and off-the-wall as that, you lunkhead? It's true that dual branding had been gaining attention since a while back, with Yohji Yamamoto collaborating with Adidas to produce dressy rose-patterned sneakers, and Batsu mass-producing the exact same school uniforms they'd designed for the movie *Battle Royale* and selling them in stores. But all of these projects derived meaning from fashion houses and creators who were active in different genres, or who had different talents, recognizing each other's work and creating a new, high-quality hybrid product through the crossover appeal of their respective methodologies and textures. Putting bank mergers and dual branding in the same bag is not acceptable. And above all, what the Loser was trying to do had none of the high-minded ambitions of dual branding, and none of its logic either. Rather, it was more in the vein of wanting to eat a lavish meal by grabbing some sushi while chewing on a steak. Or wanting to create the perfect woman by cutting off Ayumi Hamasaki's head, sticking it onto one of the Kano sisters' bodies, and then adding all-time judo champion Ryoko Tamura's strength and reflexes. That's just a collage done in plain old bad taste, dude. Why can't you figure that out? If you mix the finest *saké* with Dom Perignon, it's not going to taste good, and nobody would call that high-class. If the Space Battleship Yamato was crewed by the Power Rangers, it might be invincible, but who wants to see that?

In Amagasaki, however, the Loser's ultra-shady dual-brand merchandise sold like hot cakes. In fact, extra orders came in

as supply was outstripped by demand. But this, ultimately, was what did him in. One day, the mobster who'd taken him under his wing showed up at Office Ryugasaki Inc.

"That stuff that paired up Universal Studios with Versace, I hear it's doing real good."

"Yup, it sure is."

"Well, that's the problem. If you were selling that stuff real quiet, there wouldn't be anything to worry about, but it's all over the place. So we've got a problem. Looks like USJ figured out that someone's making products using their symbol and logo without a license, and that it's selling like crazy. So now they're looking for the manufacturer. I don't know a whole lot about trademarks and copyrights and stuff, but word is they're planning to go to court and demand payment for using a registered trademark. We're talking colossal amounts of money. On top of that, this stuff's got the Versace logo on it too. So if USJ goes to court, there's gonna be even more shit about using Versace's name without permission. So then we get slapped with huge bills from both of them. Could be, we even get sent to the slammer. So listen up: our gang ain't your parent company or nothin' like it. Cuz we sure as hell don't want the cops showing up with a search warrant just because of some small-time bootleg business. The money you made on this dual-brand deal, you can keep it. All of it. But you stop selling this stuff pronto and lay low for a while. Get your ass out of town before the cops and lawyers and everybody else start swarming around. And wash your hands clean of the bootleg business from now on. Cuz if you don't, you, us, the factory making the stuff, everybody, we're all busted."

And for this reason, the Loser and I put Amagasaki behind us and moved hastily to Shimotsuma.

Shimotsuma was where the Loser's mother, in other words my grandmother, lived. Having spent her married life in

Amagasaki, where she gave birth to and raised the Loser, Grandmother was widowed some time after the Loser got married. Although she continued to live in Amagasaki for a while, her own parents were getting on in years, and hearing that they could no longer do all the farming by themselves alone, she decided to move back to her birthplace. For the Loser, the only person he could turn to unconditionally in a jam like this was his mother, that is to say, my grandmother. Grandmother had long since buried her parents, and was now enjoying a peaceful retirement in the country, living on her pension and renting out the rice paddies she owned to an acquaintance, while growing daikon radishes, potatoes, green onions, and the like in a vegetable patch she had made for herself in her garden. Her old, traditional farmhouse was very large, with lots of rooms, and for some reason she owned lots of expensive things, like a huge refrigerator and a flat-screen television. Even taking into account the difference in land prices and the cost of living, it was markedly different from the life we had been leading in our cramped, tiny apartment in Amagasaki.

For form's sake I took an admission test for the local school board, and transferred to a high school located near Shimotsuma station. However, as I stated earlier, to reach Shimotsuma station on foot from my new residence—Grandmother's house—takes thirty minutes (okay, twenty if you race-walk). For the students at my new school, this distance is absolutely normal. Even so, getting to school is quite an ordeal, and therefore, a system whereby a school bus goes around town at the start and the end of the school day is in place. Still, if you miss it, you have to walk. And that is why all Shimotsuma high school students own a bicycle. If you're late, you miss the bus and have to use your bicycle, and if you want to get to the station on weekends and holidays, again you have to go by bicycle. Although

there were quite a lot of riffraff/delinquents/Yanki who went to school by scooter, the school rules forbade acquiring a motorcycle license, so they all refrained from bringing these into the school grounds. Near the school was a small Shinto shrine, which nobody ever cleaned and which didn't even have a priest. This was used by the delinquents as their parking lot. Grandmother had told me the day I arrived that without a bicycle, life in Shimotsuma would be very inconvenient, but I just could not bring myself to ride one. I am a Lolita, after all. When I go to school I wear a uniform, so riding a bicycle would not look all that unusual, but at all other times I am dressed as a Lolita, and going around on a bicycle like that, I feel, is in violation of the Lolita code.

Actually, I used to own a bicycle and even rode it dressed in Lolita style. But cycling as a Lolita turned out to be troublesome in the extreme. The lace edging of my petticoats and skirt got caught in the chain and smeared with grease, which never came off, while pedaling with the platform Rocking Horse Ballerinas meant I could never quite figure out where the soles of my feet were in relation to the pedals, so I'd end up braking abruptly or falling over when trying to get around a curve. But these are only superficial reasons for my hesitation to get on a bicycle. The real reason I refuse is that no bicycle available for sale tickles my maidenly fancy. No matter how necessary or convenient something may be in terms of daily life, if it is not aesthetically pleasing to me, I cannot bring myself to buy it or own it. If I could find one of those tricycles that were popular in the Victorian era, with large wheels on either side of the saddle and a small wheel in front of the handles, or a penny farthing with its quaintly huge front wheel and quaintly tiny rear wheel, I would probably make it mine because it's cute and would go really well with the Lolita look, even if it was really hard to ride and I ended up falling off, hitting my face on a utility pole and

having blood run out of my nose. However, no such bicycle is to be found in today's world. I tried calling up quite a number of bicycle shops to ask if they dealt in what I was looking for, but they all said no, and that nobody even made anything like that. I tried searching the Internet and found a few there. They all had considerably high price tags for a bicycle, but I inquired about their condition anyway. In every instance the answer was that the bicycle was an antique and in beautiful condition for display, but impossible to actually ride. I did discover one site for a place manufacturing and selling penny farthings that looked ridable, but it was in England so the site was—naturally enough—entirely in English and I couldn't make out the purchasing instructions. So I was unable to buy one over the Internet as well.

Consequently, I gave up on the idea of riding a bicycle. And, today again, I shall make my way to Shimotsuma station on foot, trudging along sad, lonely Route 131 with fields, nay, rice paddies on either side, and when you think the rice paddies are gone, a karaoke joint that looks like a freight container and closes at the in-between hour of two a.m. instead of staying open all night suddenly pops into view, along with a billiards hall you could never call a "pool bar" since it resembles a community center, so you think you might start seeing more shops and establishments, but the landscape only reverts once again to rice paddies. And as I trudge along, the words "Beauty should not be practical, luxury is an inconvenience" shall sustain my spirit.

What amazed me most upon starting life in Shimotsuma was that, at lunchtime, everyone pulled out

rice balls wrapped in dried bamboo skins, and they always had locusts cooked in soy sauce on the side. I'm lying—hinterland though it may be, the people of Shimotsuma are not living *that* far in the past. So let me start over: what amazed me most was that, if you get sick and go to the hospital here, whether you have a cold or a stomachache, if the ailment is internal, the medicine they give you is always that centuries-old herbal remedy, *Daranisuke*, while bruises, cuts, and anything else external is treated with aloe vera ointment. I'm sorry, that's another big lie. What really amazed me, really, is the curiously large number of Yanki here. For me, born and raised in the Yanki-populated town of Amagasaki, to be surprised by seeing a lot of Yanki is strange to be sure, but the attire and behavior of Yanki in Amagasaki and in Shimotsuma—or I should say, in Ibaraki—are a little, or rather, a great deal different.

Basically speaking, Yanki are Yanki, so their essential nature is probably the same, but the Yanki of Shimotsuma seemed unable to break free of the Yanki culture of a generation ago. Although I am completely ignorant when it comes to Yanki culture, among Amagasaki Yanki the fashion seemed to be to dye their hair a particular shade of orange, or purple, or in streaks. But the Yanki of Shimotsuma were still doing things like putting in razor patterns and getting really tight, kinky punch perms. Although some of them sported the gangsta look, the loose, sloppy-looking hip-hop fashion favored by gangstas was, when worn by a Shimotsuma Yanki, simply sloppy-looking. Period. They just looked like they were copying the way their dads dressed when they lay around the house on weekends. And while I say "gangsta," something about their style seemed to be nothing more than an adaptation of the usual Yanki look. High school girls were all still wearing loose socks. Among the more *kogal* types who went to Tokyo a lot and were more sensitive to fashion trends, Alba Rosa and Egoist (but

only stuff with the logo on it) remained popular, but the currently hot Cecil McBee didn't seem to have hit Ibaraki yet. *How can there be such a time lag in trends and fashions when it's right next to Tokyo? Is that minimum two-and-a-half-hour train ride responsible for slowing down the transmission of information in this age of the Internet and instantaneous worldwide communication? Or could Ibaraki deliberately be sealing itself off from the rest of the country?* My head spun with confusion.

In a place like Ibaraki, and in Shimotsuma particularly, expecting to find Lolitas would be absurd. I'm pretty sure that the people of Ibaraki are unaware that this fashion called Lolita even exists. And so, aside from the time I was in my school uniform, namely when I decked myself out from head to toe in the clothing of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright and returned to being my true self, that is to say, a Lolita, the people around me gawked as though they were seeing some fantastic mythological creature. It often happened that a group of Yanki guys around my own age would have the following discussion—"Hey, check out that really weird-looking girl over there." "Where? Whoa, what the hell is that?" "You think she's a crazy person?" "Maybe they're shootin' some TV show out here." "You think she's a celebrity?" "Nah, she's too ugly." "Well, even if she's ugly, if she's on TV we better get her autograph."—and chase me, forcing me to flee at a hard run, only to fall flat on my face part way because the shoes on my feet are platform-soled Rocking Horse Ballerinas, and be covered with the blood gushing out of my nose. Even so, I did not stop being a Lolita. No matter what hardships I may face, to be a Lolita is my *raison d'être*—more simply put, my identity. To toss that away would be to deceive myself.

Every single weekend and holiday, I went out to Tokyo. I would transfer from the Joso line to the Joban line and get to Ueno, from where I'd take the Yamanote line to Shibuya,

and one station away from there on the Toyoko line was my destination: Daikanyama. This long journey to Daikanyama was undertaken for one purpose only, and that was to visit the boutique owned and operated by my beloved Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. I'd always loved the adorable clothing of such Lolita-style brands as Jane Marple and Milk, and already from the time I was in middle school, when these were featured in fashion magazines I'd sigh with longing, thinking *this is so pretty, so very charming...I wish I could wear this...but I just don't have the money*. And I vowed I would somehow save up enough money so that by the time I reached high school, I could buy Lolita-style clothing and wear it, no matter what.

Once I started high school, I got on the train to Osaka to make that vow a reality, and headed straight to Maria Teresa in Umeda. The actual Jane Marple and Milk dresses I beheld there were all a thousand times cuter than they'd looked in the magazines. But alongside the clothing of these revered brands hung the dresses of a brand I'd never heard of before, and these stole my heart, ripped out my soul, and sent me to another world (a prayer here for the dear departed). Yes, I was a goner, thanks to that devilishly sweet, fiendishly darling slayer of a maiden's heart: Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. Everything I had ever sought was there in Baby's clothes. How could it be that there was clothing that gave shape so perfectly to my every taste and fancy? *Hey, I know that this clothing, in fact this brand itself, could only exist because it's loved by lots of girls out there, but I'm allowed to think it exists for me alone, aren't I?* I whispered to myself, hugging a red gingham-checked dress with a shirred bodice and three tiers of lace on either side, the whole thing accented with red ribbons and extravagantly adorable corsage-type roses. This was the dress that had caught my eye above all the others hanging there, each of them bearing Baby's strawberry-shaped price tag, which was pink overlaid with red and

decorated with gold lines, and had the logo in gorgeous gold lettering in the middle. I tried on the dress, and without wavering for a moment, bought it. Since I had a little money left, I also decided to buy white knee socks with the Baby symbol on them, and another pair of white knee socks made of lace, with a ribbon threaded through the top. My purse was now totally empty, but my heart was filled with joy, so full of joy I couldn't possibly fit anything more in there, I could hardly keep it in, *oh I'm going to throw up*, it was that full.

The name Baby, the Stars Shine Bright—so impossibly long you could never remember it from hearing it just once, or even say it properly after hearing it ten times—was apparently taken from the title of the band Everything But the Girl's fourth album. I thought, *You can do that? Just take someone's album title and use it as your brand name? Aren't there issues of copyright and such?*, but upon reflection, Jane Marple is the name of an elderly spinster detective in Agatha Christie novels, and they went ahead and filched that, so I guessed it was probably okay. Although they were using the album title as is for their brand name, this borrowing was entirely different from what the Loser was doing with his unlicensed use of the Versace name.

Baby, the Stars Shine Bright was started in 1988, and ever since has created fantasy clothing for young girls. Although initially they sold these clothes through selected stores on a consignment basis, in 1999 they opened their own boutique in Tokyo's Daikanyama district. At the time, the business was operated by only four or five people: Baby's main designer, Akinori Isobe, who had started the brand after quitting Atsuki Onishi and working at various small apparel makers; Fumi Isobe, who also had worked for Atsuki Onishi and then moved to 45RPM; and the company's sales force (I heard they have a few more people now...but still, less than ten). For this reason, in spite of establishing their own boutique in the first-class

district of Daikanyama, they didn't have enough people to man the place and could only open on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays—a luxurious management policy if there ever was one, or maybe simply lacking in drive, it's hard to tell. Eventually they managed to reach the point of opening from three to seven p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and from one to seven p.m. on Saturdays, Sundays, and national holidays, and today they're open the same kind of hours as other boutiques. I heard they recently opened another boutique in Osaka. (The moment I leave Amagasaki, they open a store in Osaka? Am I just totally unlucky? Was I some horribly evil person in a past life, and this is my karmic punishment or something? If I chant the Amitabha prayer all day, will that purge me of at least some of my sins? Or am I supposed to go on a pilgrimage of holy sites to improve my fortunes? Well, if Baby, the Stars Shine Bright designed a Lolita-style pilgrim outfit for me, I guess I wouldn't mind. Like, instead of a bell on the tip of the pilgrim's cane there'd be a crown, and the bamboo coolie hat they wear would be edged with lace. Cute!)

Ever since I chanced upon Baby's clothes in Maria Teresa that first time, I've been a total Baby addict. When the sales assistant in Maria Teresa told me that Baby, the Stars Shine Bright had its own website where I could buy clothing and accessories online, in spite of being terrible with machines, I went straight out to buy a computer, and through sheer doggedness, struggling with the incomprehensible manual, I finally managed to learn how to use the Internet. Because Maria Teresa only carried select items, there were things they didn't order—so how else was I supposed to see all the other things Baby made?

I wanted to know about every single item that Baby, the Stars Shine Bright had for sale. Had I not encountered Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, I would still love the Lolita look, but I probably wouldn't have set my heart to living the Lolita lifestyle. *When*

you find something precious, you have to hold on to it with all your might and never let it go, whatever else you may lose. After all, there are lots of people who die without ever finding something that's really precious to them. So don't blow your big chance. That's what I had told my mother back in first grade. So where would I be if I didn't practice what I preached?

I suppose that when I say clothing—and flouncy, frilly, ruffly, lacy clothing at that—is the most precious thing in my life, most people of intellect would just laugh disparagingly and call me a silly girl. I might be scolded, but never praised: dedicating myself to love, scholarship, or work is valid, they'd say, but devoting my entire being to something so trifling as clothing is nothing more than frittering away my life. But why can't I devote my life to clothing? What's wrong with treasuring encounters with clothes more than encounters with people? People have different values. I don't think the convictions and philosophies of people who become doctors to save the lives of poor people in developing countries are superior or inferior to those of someone like myself, who was enchanted by the Lolita look and decided to live according to the Rococo aesthetic that is its source. And even if I were wrong about that, and my aspiration to live as a Lolita is terribly foolish, or indeed the worst thing anybody could do, I still would not renounce it. Even if everybody in the entire world agrees that something is a piece of junk, if to my eyes it appears more precious and necessary than diamonds or the giant panda, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment to defend it to the death as the most important thing in the world. That is how I am. Because even if you happen to meet the love of your life, human beings are born alone, they think alone, and in the end they die alone. If you don't prize the values you chose for yourself, then what happens to you? There are people who pompously tell you that the kanji character for "person" is two lines leaning against each other, and this means

that people can't get by alone and need other people to support them, but my response to that is *fine, I don't need to be a person, then*. I wouldn't mind being a flea or a flatworm, for these self-sufficient creatures live according to their own instincts, and are far more independent than human beings, who always need someone to lean on. I mean, really. In social studies and civics classes at school, they tell you how wonderful it is to have a spirit of autonomy and independence—so how come in Japanese class they turn around and start going on about "the kanji for 'person' is..."? How about reaching a consensus on the issue first, you people at the Ministry of Education? Don't go around giving kids these contradictory messages, all right? How about establishing a unified stance and setting out a clear policy? (Quite the social activist, all of a sudden. Maybe I'll form the Japan Lolita Party and start giving speeches on street corners.)

To purchase the clothes I wanted from Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, I resorted to all sorts of fund-raising tactics: selling PCP on the sly, hacking into computers, going on "paid dates," stealing money from temple offertories...I'm lying, I'm lying. As if this social activist and scourge of the Education Ministry's inconsistent policies would do anything of the sort. If I went around doing things like that, when I grew up and became head of the Japan Lolita Party, I wouldn't be able to become governor of Tokyo, now would I? (Not that I want to. I probably won't even vote when I become eligible at twenty.) So, to return to the subject, in order to raise the funds I needed, I delivered newspapers every morning before going to school, worked the cash register at a convenience store from the time school got out until late at night, and on Sundays I spent the whole day working at an Amagasaki printing press. Sorry folks, that's another big lie. I never once thought of doing anything so laudable as work to buy the clothes I wanted. For one who lives with a Rococo spirit, productive activity such as labor is to be avoided at all costs.

Taking advantage of the Loser's booming trade in fakes, I would swindle money from him by making up stories like, "We have to buy new gym clothes for school," or "My classmate's house burned down, and she's the poorest kid in the whole school. There're ten people in her family, and they don't even have enough food to last for one day, so our class decided to collect donations for them. I'm especially good friends with her, so I'd like to be as much help to her as I possibly can." I gave quite a lot of my classmates incurable or fatal diseases, sent a number of my teachers off to developing countries, and occasionally even killed a few of them. When I needed close to a hundred thousand yen for a pair of Vivienne Westwood's Rocking Horse Ballerinas, which I'd decided were absolutely essential for full Lolitahood, I fed the Loser this story: "There's this girl in my class who was born with a heart defect, which can't be cured with today's medicine, and the doctors told her she wouldn't live to be older than fifteen, but miraculously she's made it this far. But, if you look at it the other way around, she could die tomorrow, or even right now. She knows that, and she and her family thought they just had to live with it, but now they found out there's a doctor who can fix her heart with an operation. The problem is, even though this doctor is an expert surgeon, like a genius practically, he doesn't have a medical license. So he's saying they have to pay him a hundred million yen, or some crazy sum like that, to do the operation. There's no way anyone could pay that, right? So she and her family gave up on the idea at first, but then her parents decided they just had to do this for her, and they came to school yesterday to ask for help in raising money for the operation. They actually got down on their knees in front of the whole school during the morning assembly." "Those folks are gonna have a real hard time raising that kind of money," the Loser said with tears in his eyes. "A

hundred thousand won't get them very far, so here, give them two hundred thousand."

I have to admit I felt pretty bad for lying to him that time, but I said, "Thank you, Dad. I really hope she gets to have that operation. Let's hope she'll be cured," and I took the money and used it for shopping. But I didn't neglect to return the favor with poison, viper that I am, thinking *As if there'd really be a doctor like that in real life,* you dope. *If you thought about it for two seconds, you'd figure out that came straight out of* Black Jack. *This is why you're such a loser, you loser.* I am truly rotten to the core.

The Baby, the Stars Shine Bright boutique was about a three-minute walk from Daikanyama station, on the first floor of a white building called the Daikanyama Tokyu Apartments on Hachiman Avenue. Ultra-stylish people for whom Shibuya and Aoyama left something to be desired had always come to Daikanyama, and the district was known for having tastefully fashionable boutiques that could satisfy these discerning customers. So opening a store in this district cost a lot of money, but in return for that you gained the prestige of being recognized as a fashion leader—yet when I visited Baby's store, the pumped-up feeling of "We're doing something stylish in a stylish place!" was utterly lacking, both inside and outside. In fact, while all the other boutiques and cafes and establishments in Daikanyama seemed to be vying with each other to give off that ambience, Baby alone seemed to be taking the diffident attitude of "Oh, we just happen to be located in Daikanyama, actually. It could just as well have been Shibuya or Sangenjaya, really." Both in the good sense and the bad sense, Baby, the Stars Shine Bright's boutique just didn't fit into Daikanyama. The Tokyo stores of most Lolita-style brands are concentrated in Harajuku. Recently, more Lolita-style stores have been opening in Shinjuku's Marui One building, so Shinjuku

is starting to become a Lolita stomping ground as well, but the real Lolita mecca remains Harajuku, with Laforet Harajuku as its temple. The focus of Lolita fashion is turned in the opposite direction from such things as solidity, functionality, trends, and refinement. If the aesthetics of subtraction is the basis of design, then the aesthetics of overdoing it forms the basis of the Lolita look. Lolita is about taking a skirt that would be dressy if worn normally, and slipping it over a super-ruffly crinoline to make an exaggerated silhouette and teeter on that fine line between elegance and bad taste, only to tumble quite often onto the side of bad taste. For this reason, Lolitas have always been the butt of relentless criticism from those who consider themselves fashionable. Aside from Baby, there was not a single Lolita-style brand that had opened a boutique in Daikanyama, where tasteful elegance was absolutely *de rigueur*.

The first time I stood in front of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright's boutique, with its pale pink door and a tailor's dummy decked out in full Baby attire standing next to it, my heart started pounding violently. Quite out of keeping with my wicked Rococo character, I was beset with nerves. And then, when I entered, it was—aah, how can I express it—oh, just, oh, such a wonderfully sweet space it could make you melt. In spite of being their flagship store, the place was quite small, and decorated from top to bottom in white and pink, with a white heart-shaped table and a bright red sofa in the middle of it. Anybody who saw this would probably want to butt in with *the place is cramped enough as it is, so what did you stick this table and sofa in here for? Thanks to these things, you get five customers in the joint and the whole place is full.* But no matter how impractical something may be, treasuring cuteness over function or convenience was so very typical of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright that I couldn't help feeling with renewed respect that this was, indeed, worthy of the brand that had turned my life upside down.

Although it was a Sunday, there wasn't a single customer inside the store. And so, on the day of my Daikanyama boutique debut, I was fortunate enough to have the entire place to myself for a while. It wasn't as though they were burning incense, and in fact there was no scent at all in the place, but even so I got the feeling that there was a mysterious, otherworldly fragrance unlike anything I had ever smelled before pervading the store, and while gazing upon the clothing hanging there I quietly filled my lungs with it, softly taking deep breaths so that the shop attendant wouldn't notice. That day, I bought a rather chic cardigan of black knitted lace with princess sleeves, and an off-white bag with a crown sticking out on the front. When I brought these two items to the cash register, the adorable shop attendant said, "Excuse me, but would you be Miss Ryugasaki?" Astonished, I answered, "Yes. But how did you know that?" She started giggling like a child, and said, "I was watching you the whole time, thinking you just might be, because you're wearing our white baby-doll jumper over our Little Princess blouse, and our mini-hat with white burnout-lace roses. And your shoes are Rocking Horse Ballerinas. I work here in the store, but I'm also in charge of our online sales. So even though I don't know what our regular online customers look like, I do know their names and have a pretty good idea of which items they own. Plus, you sometimes post to our website's bulletin board, and one time you mentioned that almost all of your clothes are ours, but for shoes you always wear Rocking Horse Ballerinas. And you also wrote a while back that you'd be moving to the Tokyo area. So I figured you must be Miss Ryugasaki."

Even though I had made a lot of purchases from them, surely there were lots of other Baby freaks out there, and even if she knew my name, she had no way of knowing what my face looked like—yet even so she'd remembered me when there was nothing special about me, and could tell who I was on our

very first meeting, just from how I was dressed! This made me incredibly happy, and besides giving me the illusion that I had become an ultra-VIP, it also felt somewhat like having someone I'd always had a crush on suddenly tell me they're in love with me too. I was simply ecstatic.

After this, my feelings for Baby were unstoppable, growing boundlessly greater than ever before. I mean to say, really... who could blame me? And so, ever since, I couldn't stand letting a single week go by without making that fearfully long journey, that all-day expedition, out to Daikanyama. It's all your fault, Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. You're the one who made me unable to live without you. Just thinking about you makes me—ooh, I don't care if they call me a shameful hussy—tremble inside, aah, it makes my body go hot all over. Before I know it, my body's aching for you and I just can't hold myself back. Mmm, see? Just thinking about you now is getting me all wet. Ooh, aah, yes! But there's no going back now. I'm yours, Baby. Do anything you want with me! I want you, I need you, give it to me, Baby! Oh, I can't bear it! (Whoops. What am I writing? If I write stuff like this, I'll never get chosen as a pure and innocent Mitsui Rehouse girl.)

Wonderful though it was that I could drop in at Baby, the Stars Shine Bright's boutique every week since relocating to Shimotsuma, I was faced with a conundrum: I could no longer sponge funds off of the Loser to buy their clothes.

Since the Loser was allowed to appropriate his shady dual-branding profits without paying the gang any duty, he had decamped to Shimotsuma with a fairly ample nest egg—but

until he found a new source of income, it would be difficult to tap him for large sums. Through the good offices of the charitable benefactor in Amagasaki who'd told him to lay low for a while, the Loser had been introduced to persons in Ibaraki who made a business of thuggery (in a word, yakuza), and given employment as someone who offers food, toys, or games for a fee at festivals (in a word, a *tekiya*), and was getting ready to ply his new trade. The yakuza world has a curious hierarchy—or should I say class system—so even though you'd think they're all basically the same breed, and logically speaking the hardworking *tekiya* ought to be considered worthier than yakuza who just go around extorting "rents" and protection money, in the yakuza world this view was turned on its head. Those who engage in actual labor, such as *tekiya* and bootleggers, are of low rank. Yakuza, who don't lift a finger except to extort money from these hardworking folks, have the higher status. If we interpret this broadly, this is somewhat similar to the social system that prevailed until the nineteenth century, when there was still an aristocracy. Lords got richer automatically while amusing themselves, and commoners received very little while working themselves to the bone, with the major part of their income appropriated as common practice by those above them. *Well, that's not just in the yakuza world—it's pretty much the same thing in ordinary companies, ain't it? The bigshots just sign the papers and go off to the golf course every day, and they make piles of money, while the employees work their asses off and get peanuts, so they barely have enough to go down to the tavern and order a beer at the end of the month*—quoth the Loser, investing this declaration with the implication that he himself fully accepted this social order as a natural state of affairs. Of the various stalls put out by *tekiya* at local festivals, the Loser had evidently chosen to go with the perennially popular balloon-fishing, and had assembled such equipment as a pump to blow up the little

round balloons and a shallow plastic tub to float them in.

I was thus forced to think up some means to raise the funds I required to buy clothing. So, out of desperation, I put out an ad in a personal listings magazine. When we moved to Shimotsuma, the Loser had brought along all the bootleg merchandise he would no longer be able to sell. His original plan, it seems, was to offload it on his yakuza mentor, but his mentor refused, saying, "I ain't holdin' on to this shit for you, no way. You take it on with you to Ibaraki." Fortunately Grandmother's house was large, with many unused rooms, and there was plenty of space to store the boxes. My idea was to sell some of these wares through my ad. When I asked the Loser if I could have the fake Versace items, he said, "Yeah, go ahead. They said I can't sell this stuff anymore, so I'm just stuck with it. Take whatever you want."

I went out and bought a magazine listing personal ads by people wanting to buy and sell clothing and collectibles, or looking for friendship, love, or new members for their activities, and following the instructions for putting out an ad of your own, I created one and sent it to the editors: "Versace clothing for sale at incredibly cheap prices. Everything from sweaters and tracksuits to cell-phone straps and pencil cases. All unused, in perfect condition. Note: all of the items are counterfeits." Although my ad was listed in the next issue, I got no response. *Maybe I shouldn't have been so honest*, I thought. *Instead of coming right out and saying they were counterfeits, maybe I should have been more ambiguous and written "all items made in Japan."* But some time later, the magazine forwarded three letters to me. One was from a guy in Aichi prefecture, another was from a guy in Ibaraki prefecture, and one was from a girl, also in Ibaraki. The guy in Aichi had used a ballpoint pen to scrawl a sloppy message on a sheet of notepaper, asking if I had any suits, and if so what were they like, saying he could pay up to two thousand

yen, but I decided not to send him an answer. Someone who just scribbles a letter on notepaper, to a person he's never met or even seen before, is too boorish to deserve a response. The guy from Ibaraki wrote that he wanted a detailed description of the things I had, so could I give him a call? This letter, too, I decided to ignore. Although the letter itself was perfectly adequate, I cannot speak on the phone with an unfamiliar male. I even have trouble being friendly with familiar males. I think I have a slight case of androphobia. Or perhaps it's male aversion? I mean, guys are so dirty. And smelly. And crude. And just plain yucky.

In the end, I decided to contact only the girl from Ibaraki, who happened to live in Shimotsuma too and was named Ichiko Shirayuri. "Miz Ryugasaki. Pleeze let me buy your Versace stuff. I don't have much money so I can't pay you a whole lot, but I really want some Versace no matter what, so I beg you wherefore pleeze." The writing was printed out in block letters, *please* was spelled "pleeze," and the ending had the mysterious, nonsensical clause, "so I beg you wherefore pleeze." I suppose she meant "so I beg you therefore please," which *still* wouldn't make much sense. But how was I to answer a request couched in the interrogative form of "wherefore please"? Guessing that the writer was maybe in the first year of middle school, I sent her the following answer: "Dear Miss Shirayuri, Thank you for your letter. Regarding the merchandise, I have a considerable variety of items in large quantities. If you would kindly inform me what sort of things you desire, I will select suitable items and send you another letter detailing their color, design, shape, and other particulars. As for the price, I am open to negotiation. However, as I stated in my ad, all of the Versace items I have are counterfeits, and I request your understanding of this point." Wondering if I had used too many big words and complicated sentence structures—did she even know what "particulars" and

"negotiation" meant?—I sent off the letter anyway. I received an answer right away, the gist of which was that she lived in Shimotsuma too, so would it be all right if she came by sometime to see the merchandise for herself? Well, if she was just a middle schooler, I didn't see any problem with inviting her to the house. I called the cell phone number given in her letter and arranged to have her come over after lunch that Saturday.

School ended at noon on Saturday, and I went straight home because that girl was coming over. Even though she was younger than I, it would be our first meeting and moreover, she was going to be buying clothes from me. Thinking it would be rude to greet her without being dressed at least somewhat properly, I decided to wear my white rose-patterned lace blouse with a black velvet knee-length skirt that's decorated in front with ladder lace and all kinds of other white lace, while the back is like curtains that are closed at the top and draped back at the sides, and where the velvet would ordinarily fall—namely the middle of the hips—layers of tulle peek out like bustles. On my head I perched a large white ribbon made to be worn like a headdress, and then I went to the room where all the bogus Versace was stored to arrange everything, sorting it into piles by type while I waited.

We had agreed to meet at one thirty, but she didn't appear. Maybe she was lost? Perhaps my directions had been inadequate. I'd told her to go just a little bit east on Route 131 where it intersects Route 249, and take the first left, which is a narrow road—it was an ordinary farmhouse with rice paddies in front, and she'd see it right after she turned. Maybe that wasn't detailed enough? But there was nothing around the house, so how else could I explain how to get here? As I sat there waiting, I suddenly heard the noisy cacophony of an engine, probably from the motorcycle of a passing Yanki. The loud vrooming sound gradually got louder, and then it stopped. Just when I thought

it was finally quiet again, the earsplitting sound of those horns that Yanki like to put on their bikes and cars, arranged to play the *Godfather* theme, rang out: *parara rararara rarararaa*!! *parara rararara rarararaa*!!!! It was blasted out repeatedly, over and over. The source of the sound seemed to be right in front of our house, or at least very close to it, so I ventured out into the yard. The most outrageous motorcycle was parked out front.

In front of the handlebars towered an indescribably strange sunshade-type thing, fixed willy-nilly without any thought of balance, and painted with the Rising Sun. The seat had a backrest, which stretched so high skyward that if Giant Baba stood behind it, his head probably wouldn't show over the top. The seat itself was leopard-print. And the sunshade and backrest were not the only elongated features: behind the backrest were attached what would be called "tail fins" on a car, I believe, like super-long fake nails only a thousand times larger, and these too spread upward, reaching about as high as the seat and painted a camouflage pattern. The muffler was twisted, turned out, and extended, and again, pointed up. This muffler, while oddly shaped, was an ordinary metallic silver color, but the rest of the body was painted shocking pink all over, and overlaid with glitter. This was obviously a hot rod belonging to a Yanki, or more specifically, a Zokki—a member of a Bosozoku biker gang. I had seen bikes of this sort in Amagasaki and here in Ibaraki, but this was my first experience of seeing one this crazily souped-up from right up close. *Could something sporting so many decorations both in front and back actually run? Just the accessories alone look pretty heavy*—is what I thought as I gazed upon the chopper from a distance, giving it minus a thousand style points for the garish bad taste of its color scheme and utterly nonexistent sense of design. I mean to say, an ordinary motorcycle would probably be fine with all those embellishments so long as it had enough horsepower, but the bike in front of my eyes was, in

spite of all the gnarly remodeling, a scooter. No matter how you looked at it, it was a plain old 50cc scooter.

This freakish scooter stopped blasting its horn when it realized I was there. And then, the person who had been doing the blasting, namely the person who had been riding the bike, got off of it and started walking toward me. The person had straight bleached-blond hair down to her shoulders, wore blue eye shadow and bright red lipstick, and had on a navy-blue school uniform comprised of a short jacket and a very long skirt with a prodigious number of pleats, which dragged on the ground. On her feet were—well, it would sound good to call them "mules," but actually they were cheap purple slip-on sandals of the type moms wear when going out to the neighborhood supermarket, and their sparkles glinted in the sun. *Wow, a* sukeban*, and a super old-school one too…Who knew bad girls wearing outfits like this still existed? Hand it to Ibaraki—this place is deep. If a curator for a natural history museum saw her, she'd immediately be captured and exhibited next to a stegosaur skeleton in the Fossils section.* As I was thinking this and watching her approach with some trepidation because, let's face it, people like that are kinda scary, the *sukeban* yelled out to me in a loud voice.

"Hey girlie, my name's Shirayuri. Would Miz Momoko be around at home?"

If that was an attempt at polite language, it was a shambles. But anyway, being the "girlie" addressed, I said yes. Oh dear, this was that Ichiko Shirayuri who really wanted Versace no matter what! From the clumsy style of her letter I had assumed she would be about thirteen years old, but there was no question now that she was a bona-fide high-schooler, about the same age as I. It would seem the awkwardness of her letter derived not from childishness, but from simple ignorance, or should I say, stupidity. As I fidgeted in the garden, thinking what a pain

it was to get involved with someone of this sort, the *sukeban* spoke again.

"So could you conduct me over to Miz Momoko if you will?"

To this, I answered nervously, "Um, I'm Momoko, actually."

You should have seen her face when she heard that. She twisted her mouth and widened her eyes, and her expression could have been taken as wanting to pick a fight, or being really sad and about to burst into tears, either way.

"I said, Miz Momoko."

"Yes, that's me. Unfortunately."

"I'm talking about Miz Momoko Ryugasaki."

"That is quite definitely myself."

"Get outta here."

"Why would I go to the trouble of lying to someone I've never even met before?"

"I mean, shit. There's nothing Momoko-like about you, is there?"

Momoko-like—aah, indeed. This name of mine. I hate this name of mine. I mean, "peach child"? Please. There's something vaguely voluptuous about it, plus there's a female comedian in Osaka, a former Yanki, with the same name. I had forgotten that my name, Momoko, has a special meaning for Yanki everywhere.

Back in the 1980s, when Yanki were at the height of their glory, there was a manga that was passed from hand to hand among them (especially the girls) as their Bible. This was Kazuko Makino's *High-teen Boogie*. A true-love story taking place in Yokohama, it starts off with a biker-gang boss falling in love at first sight with a high school honors student. No matter what obstacles are placed in their way, no matter what adversities they face, the two of them believe in each other, and the story of their steadfast love and devotion swept the Yanki off their feet. I confess I have read this manga myself. But for all

the support it had among Yanki, I found it extremely lacking in factors that would send Yanki wild with excitement. I mean, when the girl tells the guy he'd have to quit the biker gang if he wants to go out with her, he drops his gang like a hot potato. There are hardly any fight scenes or race scenes, and partway through, the story suddenly morphs into a musician's rise to stardom. And yet, Yanki seemed to love *High-teen Boogie* more than any Yanki manga featuring more realistic Yanki. I wondered why, and thought about it until I figured it out. When the guy is seventeen and still the boss of the biker gang, he meets the honors student, a sixteen-year-old girl. And after various twists and turns, yadda yadda yadda, the two of them drop out of school, move in together, the girl has a baby at age seventeen, and after that they get married. It's this falling in love, having a baby, and getting married while still in their teens that is the Yanki way, and the Yanki dream. Even if the characters leave the biker gang milieu, so long as the falling-in-love-having-a-baby-and-getting-married-in-their-teens part is depicted romantically, a Yanki is going to get all soft and gooey over it. Indeed, perhaps the very fact that the Yanki way forms the core of the story discreetly behind the scenes instead of being the main focus is what makes this manga so powerfully clutch Yanki hearts like a curse, never letting them go.

Be that as it may, Yanki influenced by this manga are as numerous as the stars in the night sky, and the names of the protagonists remain in use today as icons of a sort. The boy's name was Sho, and the girl's name was—yes, you've guessed it—Momoko. It is not certain whether my parents gave me this name as a result of reading *High-teen Boogie*, but from middle school on, it would occasionally happen that I would be called out by Yanki types and told it was unforgivable that I, a non-Yanki, should have this special name that was reserved for Yanki only, and get threatened or beaten up for this very

unfair reason. If it were okay to trade names, I would give away this Yanki name without a second thought and go get a more suitably Lolita name for myself. But that is not how it works. I've heard you can change your name if you can get a court to agree that it interferes markedly with your leading a normal life, but in my case it's obvious an appeal for a name change would be rejected. I don't think "It's a Yanki name" would appease a court of law.

"You thought, because my name is Momoko, that I'd be straight out of *High-teen Boogie*, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I mean, shit, it'd be weirder to hear 'Momoko' and expect someone like *you* to show up. Especially when they got so much Versace they can go around selling it...Who the hell'd read that ad and think some little middle schooler wrote it?"

"Middle schooler—? I'm in high school."

"Get the fuck outta here. Who ever heard of a high schooler wearing frilly kid clothes like that?"

"I'm in the second year at Shimotsuma Nansei High School."

"What, you're the same age as me? I'm second-year at Oume Kogyo High."

"Oh, the one that only dummies and Yanki go to."

"Shut the fuck up! You better not go around talking shit about Omeko, or I'll kick your fucking ass."

There were several high schools in Shimotsuma, and the one I attended, commonly referred to as "Shimonan," had a high college acceptance rate and was apparently viewed as relatively elite among the schools in Ibaraki. In contrast, her school was known for having a close-to-zero college acceptance rate. Well, I couldn't really care less about college acceptance rates and test scores, actually. My objection is to Shimotsuma Oume Kogyo High School's unofficial, and untowardly vulgar, nickname, which was Omeko. If you were to say there was nothing wrong with it, I suppose there's nothing wrong with it, but for some-

one from Kansai, this nickname was perilously close to violating the broadcasting code. Every time I heard this nickname, I would blush bright red. In particular, when a girl said it, I would want to rush behind her and block her mouth with my hands. I mean to say, really...Girls just should not use filthy words like that, should they?

"Well, I guess you shouldn't judge people by their looks. So hey, I'm sorry."

"Of course you should judge people by how they look. You're dressed like a Yanki so you probably *are* a Yanki, but even if you aren't, you're dressed like that because you want people to *think* you're a Yanki. And I'm dressed like a Lolita because I am a Lolita."

"Huh. You're right. So I guess I didn't have to apologize. Wait a sec, is that right? Or am I just lettin' you dick me around?"

"No, this is fine."

"So hey, I almost forgot. I'm here for the Versace. Was that for real, or were you just shittin' me?"

"I've got plenty."

I led her to the room where piles and piles of bogus Versace were stored. The moment she entered, she shrieked with wonder like a little girl.

"Holy fucking shit! Wow, my god, this is all Versace?!"

"Not quite. Every single thing here is totally fake."

"Who the fuck cares?"

Why it did not matter to her at all was completely incomprehensible to me. What exactly were her standards of judgment?

"Whoa, check this one out. Cool!"

The item she was holding was a pink leopard-print tracksuit, the back of which was emblazoned with a huge Versace symbol and logo in gold.

"And wow, look at this! Man, talk about some classy shit."

The next item she had pounced on screaming was a dual-brand sweatshirt, a product of the Loser's display of originality that had gotten us sent to this Elba.

"This is both Universal Studios *and* Versace, right?"

I nodded, with mixed feelings.

"Man, I never saw anything like *this* before. Bet it's collectible!"

Of course she had never seen anything like it before: Versace had never made anything of the sort. As to whether it was "collectible," well, that was harder to answer. Certainly it was rare, but it had absolutely no value whatsoever. However, now I understood exactly who was buying this merchandise that the Loser had produced, and found myself oddly satisfied.

"Shit, man, look at all this stuff. I want *everything* here. But I ain't got the money to buy all the stuff I want, so...Hey, you got any jackets?"

"I've got quite a variety of men's jackets, but not very many ladies'..."

I hunted around for some women's jacket-type tops and brought them out.

"I gotta go to a cousin's wedding, see. And I was like, no fucking way am I gonna wear that kinda shit, but my mom's being real hard-assed about it. She's saying it's a wedding so I gotta dress properly, but, like, far's I'm concerned, being dressed properly means wearing my kamikaze coat, right? But she's saying no way to that. So I figured, I'd meet her halfway and go in a Versace jacket, cuz I mean, if it's Versace she can't say shit, right? But the thing is, Versace's fucking expensive. I mean, there's no way I could afford it unless I got a full-time job and quit the gang and stuff, so I was, like, wondering if I could borrow one from a friend or something. So then, when I saw your ad, I was like, thank god for big mercies."

That should be "thank god for *small* mercies." Of course you

should be thankful for big mercies too, I suppose, but what exactly would those be? And even if she'd got it right, I didn't think that was quite the right expression to use in this case. Well, I would soon find out in ample measure that if I started carping on Miss Shirayuri's misuse of language, there'd be no end in sight.

"I think this one's the classiest."

The item she showed me, after dithering for the longest time, was shaped like a jacket but made of flimsy black rayon, with pictures of a silver chain and a red rose adorning the back, snaking around an enormous Versace symbol and logo in gold. It was easily the flashiest of the jacket-type tops I had brought out, and not classy in the least. In her mind, "classy" and "flashy" seemed to mean one and the same thing.

"Can I try it on?"

She removed her jacket, and slipped on the rayon thing. I brought a full-length mirror from another room and placed it in front of her. When actually worn, the jacket proved to be far trashier and tackier-looking than when held in the hands.

"Damn, man, this is really fucking snazzy. Gotta admit, a little punk like me can't really do it justice. But I really love it, though."

Little punk or full-grown adult, there is nobody in the world who could *"do justice" to something as bizarre-looking as that.*

"If you were willing to sell this to me, how much would you want?"

Her tone had suddenly become very subdued. Frankly, I had absolutely no idea what kind of price would be considered appropriate for something like this, but figuring I could always come down if she said it was too much, I raised three fingers on my right hand.

"Three bills, huh...? Yeah, well I guess it *would* be about that much. I mean, I know even that's a really low price, actually."

Hearing her downcast voice, I lowered one of my fingers.

"What, really? You'll give it to me for two? Cuz that, I can pay."

She pulled out two ten thousand yen bills from the pocket of her skirt, and handed them to me.

"No, no. You're off by a zero."

"Oh shit, you meant two hundred thousand!"

"That's even further off. Two meant two thousand."

"Get the fuck outta my face. Who ever heard of anyone buying a brand-new Versace jacket for two thousand?"

"If it were genuine it might cost two hundred thousand, but this is counterfeit."

"So what if it's counterfeit, Versace's Versace."

Hel-lo? I had no idea what on earth she was saying. Trying to reach a consensus on this issue, I did my best to explain.

"Um, do you know what 'counterfeit' means? It means fake. Phony. This has Versace's logo on it, and Versace's symbol too, but the actual Versace brand has absolutely nothing to do with it. It was made in a Japanese factory, using cheap material and shoddy workmanship. If it was a super-copy, even though it's fake, the material and workmanship would be very close to the original, so in that case it might be worth a high price. But this stuff is absolutely worthless. Maybe the best example I could give you is this: you buy three T-shirts for a thousand yen and stick the Versace logo on them. That's basically what this is. Because if you went to a real Versace store and looked for this jacket, you wouldn't find it there or even anything close to it. Versace has never sold anything like this. Ever. I'll tell you the truth: this is something my father had a factory make. He designed it, with no knowledge of fashion whatsoever, and ordered a factory to make it."

She was silent for a while and seemed to be thinking something over.

"Yeah, but Versace's Versace, even if it's fake."

She had not digested my explanation in the least.

"Look, I understand what you're saying, okay? I totally get it that this thing's got nothing to do with the real Versace, okay? But, I mean, even if it's bogus, your pop used this logo and symbol cuz he wanted to make a Versace, right? So okay, maybe he had to use crappier material and stuff so he could sell it for cheap, but I kinda think the main thing is that he wanted to make a Versace. You know? Like, it's the spirit that counts. So if it's got the Versace spirit, who cares if it's fake or real? Same difference."

"This jacket has the Versace spirit?"

"Oh, yeah. It's totally got it."

Even if the spirit is there, I think a fake is a fake, and anyway, I'm pretty sure there wasn't even a trace of the spirit she was talking about in the Loser's merchandise, but if she wanted to buy this thing knowing it was phony, I had no right to stop her. Because if she had discovered some worth in this tawdry piece of counterfeit, who was I to deny that worth? If she said that two thousand yen was far too little and insisted on paying me twenty thousand, I had to accept twenty thousand in order to honor her sense of values.

"All right. I'll sell it to you for twenty thousand."

"Okay. This is worth at least twenty thousand, for sure. But if you're saying two thousand's okay with you, that would help me out a lot."

So I gave the jacket to her for two thousand. I showed her out, and as she straddled the seat of her ludicrous scooter, she turned to me.

"I kinda feel bad that you're letting me have something this great for so cheap. I mean, we just met and now I already owe you. Well, I always pay back favors, so if anything happens, just mention Ichiko from the Ponytails."

"If anything happens?"

"You know, if anyone tries to smack you around or shake you down or anything. Just mention my name. They find out you're tight with the Ponytails, they'll get the fuck outta your way."

"You usually wear a ponytail?"

"Huh? No, you dope. Check out the writing on my cool-ass fins."

Cool-ass fins—these did not refer to appendages a fish may use to lower the temperature of its posterior, but to those gigantic fake nail-type things attached to the back of her scooter. Against the camouflage background, in florid red script, were painted five complicated kanji characters of the type you see in Buddhist sutras, and they spelled out PO-NI-I-TEI-RU.

"The Ponytails, see, is the name of Shimotsuma's toughest girl-biker gang. We're only into riding, but if someone wants to fight, we give back as good as we get. You just moved to Ibaraki, plus you seem pretty clueless about bikers, but well, any Yanki in Shimotsuma who doesn't know the Ponytails is just a full-of-shit poser."

"But why are you 'the Ponytails'?"

"Oh, you mean where'd we get the name? Well, duh, whaddaya think, you dope? That's Momoko's hairstyle in *High-teen Boogie*."

How hopelessly banal. Everything about her was not just halfway, but totally, hick. It was not just a question of taste, but went far beyond that: everything about her was somehow wrong, and irredeemably hick. So hick I couldn't even laugh. So hick it stopped the tears coming in spite of being so pathetic. Fearing for her future, I stood there watching as she roared off down the road in front of the paddy fields, her hair waving behind her.

"What, my seat back? This is what you call a three-stage seat, and if you buy it in a store, the tallest one you'll find is only about 160 centimeters high—but mine's extra-long, see, so it's 180. You want one this tall, you gotta custom-order it and it'll cost you at least a hundred thousand, but I managed to get a bunch of used parts, so mine's customized for a lot cheaper. I work part-time at this garage in Tsuchiura, see. It's this place that does mostly bike repairs and custom work, and it's just this little workshop, but there ain't a single Zokki in Ibaraki that don't know it. This bull-headed old man runs it with his son, well the son's pretty old too, but anyway, the two of them run the place. It's called Nakamura Motors, like, this totally run-of-the-mill name, right? But if you need repairs, or wanna soup up your rod, you can ask them to do *anything* and they'll do it. They're really good at paint jobs too, and they're awesome mechanics. I swear, they fucking rule. And since I work there, see, I can get totally amazing rare-ass parts from bikes that're about to be scrapped, for real cheap. Man, I wish I could meet the guy who had this before me. He must've been fucking cool. Like, a full-on true-blue Zokki, man. I mean, shit, check out this low-rider seat with the snazzy leopard print. This guy was *serious*."

"How do you get to Tsuchiura from here?"

"My bike, what else?"

"I know Tsuchiura's in Ibaraki, but isn't it really far?"

"Not really. It's only a little over an hour on my bike."

That's pretty darn far, actually...

"At first, see, I just wanted to learn more about bikes, plus I was kinda hoping to get all kinds of parts for cheap, so I went there for an interview, right? But like, after I started working there, I found out how totally cool bikes are. Like, it's pretty deep, you know? Like, you take a bike that's totally headed for the scrap heap, and you fix the engine, or replace it, and you

remove the beat-up frame, and use that as a model to make a new frame, and you got yourself a beautiful rod. I swear, we're talking full-on craftsmanship, man. So I'm watching them do awesome work like that, and I start getting into it for real, like, not just playing around or trying to be cool, you know? So now I just wanna learn everything those two can teach me, and become a motorcycle mechanic myself. Specializing in repairs and custom work."

"So are you going to work there full-time someday?"

"Yeah, if they'll let me. I talked to the son about it, a while back. I said, I know I'm a girl, and I'm not that quick on the uptake and stuff, but I really want to work here. He just folded his arms and stared at me for a while, but then he said, if I don't drop out of school and manage to graduate, he'd be willing to think about it."

"That's nice."

"Yeah, man, it totally made my day. So hey, what about you? What're you gonna do when you graduate?"

"I haven't given it any thought."

"What? You only got a year left. Think about your fucking future, man. Well, you go to Shimonan, so I guess you'll be going to college."

"I haven't decided about that, either. College seems really boring."

"So you're gonna work?"

"Oh, no. I dislike labor of any sort."

"You can't just fuck around for the rest of your life."

"You think not?"

"Look, you know what you like. You know what you want. Way more than I do. So all you have to do is find some work related to that stuff."

"I'm not sure I want to turn things I love into work."

"Why not?"

"Because if I turned it into work, I'd probably have to do things I don't enjoy doing as well, and I'd see things I loved from the other side. And I wouldn't want that."

"You go around saying shit like that, you won't get anywhere. You'll just be a half-ass for the rest of your life."

"That's fine by me. I'm sure I'll get by."

"Don't kid yourself. You think the world's an easy ride, you're gonna crash into a brick wall."

"Going through life treating the world like an easy ride is precisely my aim. I am a Rococophile, you see. And Rococo is true anarchy."

"Anarchy? Wasn't that a band that all the Zokki used to be crazy about? I think they're still around, actually."

"Never heard of them."

"You are fucking ignorant, girl. What kind of music do you listen to, anyway?"

"Bach. And Johann Strauss."

"Never heard of those bands."

You are far more ignorant than I shall ever be.

"What do you listen to, Miss Shirayuri?"

"Me? Well, Ei-chan, of course, and Ozaki."

"Ei-chan is that person called Eikichi Yazawa, right? And Ozaki is that golfer?"

"Yutaka, you dope! Who the hell'd go around listening to Jumbo Ozaki sing?"

"Yanki listen to Yutaka Ozaki?"

"Hell yeah. Tell you the truth, I kinda listen to Ei-chan just cuz everyone else does, but I really love Ozaki."

"I see. Changing the subject, I've wanted to ask you this from before, but what's the purpose of that strange sunshade-type thing you have on the front of your bike?"

"You mean my rocket cowl? Hmm. Hard to say what its purpose is, really."

"Isn't it difficult to drive if that thing's there?"

"Whaddaya think, you moron? Of course it's difficult to drive. It's fucking hard to get balanced."

"So why do you have it?"

"Because it's fucking cool, that's why. It's my way of showing people I'm not just dicking around with being a biker. That I'm into this shit for real."

"So you love your bike."

"Well, yeah...I mean, it's more like, my other self, you know?"

"And yet, it's just a scooter."

"Shut the fuck up! Who gives a shit?"

"I thought maybe you wanted a license for a real motorcycle, but you failed the test or something..."

Bull's-eye, it seemed. She suddenly flushed a bright red.

"It's not that simple, all right? I could totally ace the driving part of it, but first they make you take this written test."

I had known this person to be considerably dim-witted, but this was additional confirmation, had I needed any.

"I'll get a 400cc license eventually. But, tell you the truth, I don't care if everyone makes fun of me and stuff, cuz I love this bike. I mean, this is the first bike I've ever owned. So okay, it's a scooter, but it's really special to me. Actually, what I really wanted was a Monkey or a Gorilla, cuz even though they're scooters, they look like real motorcycles, but it was right after I got my license and I didn't have much cash. So I went ahead and bought this Lead cuz it was on discount. So yeah, I was like, this is kind of a joke for someone who seriously wants to be a biker, like, it's this total mom-and-pop scooter, right? But it *is* a Honda, after all, and even though what I bought was just 50cc, I could easily switch to a 100cc engine if I want, and I figured I could customize it myself and make it really cool. So I've been fiddling around with it ever since, adding all kinds of stuff

to this dinky Lead. The first thing I did was straighten the muffler out and make it really long, and then I custom-added all this other stuff, and now look at it. It's a pretty fucking impressive rod. Guess that's why I love it so much."

"But if you attach all these things to a 50cc scooter, won't it be really slow?"

"Duh. Even when the speedometer says sixty, I'm only going maybe thirty kilometers an hour."

"Well, that's no good. I mean, you're a rider, right?"

"You are so goddamn stupid. I mean, yeah, I'm a rider, but if I go too fast, it'd be dangerous."

I'm not too familiar with this subject, but if you call yourself a rider, wouldn't your aim be to ride as fast as possible? Is "if I go too fast, it'd be dangerous" something a rider says?

Ever since that first day, Miss Shirayuri had made a habit of dropping by our house. The black jacket had apparently been a major dud at the wedding (naturally) and given the hairy eyeball by all and sundry present, but when she showed it off to her friends in the Ponytails, everybody had glommed onto it covetously. Hearing that if they came to my house there was Versace galore, from jackets to tracksuits to pencil cases, and all at bargain basement prices, the Ponytails had cried as one that they, too, would like to have a look, but Miss Shirayuri had taken on the role of shopping intermediary, commission-free, saying, "A whole bunch of biker chicks showing up at some regular folks' house is just gonna freak them out, so you tell me what kind of stuff you want and I'll go get it for you." I sold a tremendous amount of hideously trashy items.

"Hey, Miss Shirayuri?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you by any chance be lying about your first name?"

"What the hell is this about?"

"Actually it's not Ichiko, is it? It's Ichigo."

"No."

"Yes, it is."

I had found a voice mail from her on my cell phone so I had called her back, but someone else, a woman, had answered. *Oops*, I thought, and asked if I had reached Ichiko's cell phone. The woman answered, "Oh, please wait a moment. Yes, this is Ichigo's phone. It was ringing, so I just answered it. Oh, you know what, Ichigo's taking a bath right now, so I'll have her call you back." Evidently, the woman was her mother. And this mother of hers had said, if I was hearing her correctly, not "Ichiko" but "Ichigo." When I related this conversation to Miss Shirayuri, she looked very embarrassed.

"Yeah, that's right. Actually it's Ichigo. 'Strawberry,' fer cryin' out loud. I don't know what the hell they were thinking when they gave me that cutsie-ass name. It's bad enough my last name's a flower. Well, you can't be a Yanki with a name like Ichigo Shirayuri, no way. So I tell everybody my name's Ichiko, and at school too, when you write your name on tests and stuff, I just change the *g* to a *k*."

"But Ichigo is so sweet."

"That's exactly what I hate about it."

"Ichigo! Ichigo!"

"Shut the fuck up! How come a frilly-ass chick like you gets a cool name like Momoko, and I get stuck with Ichigo?"

"I wish we could trade."

"You said it, girl…"

And ever after, I made it a point to call her by her real first name. For one thing, even though she was the same age as I, Ichigo made a big deal about being born in April to my June, and in spite of being stupid, always acted like she was so mature and I was just a child. Well, certainly, if she and I stood next to each other, anyone would look at me, standing only 150 centimeters tall and somewhat baby-faced, and at her, slim but

quite tall at 167 centimeters or so, with her eyebrows shaved off and thin pencil lines drawn in their place like an old-time cabaret hostess, and assume she was older. But just for a reason like that, I didn't want to let this backward Yanki lord it over me. When Ichigo said things like "I swear, you're just a kid" or "Man, you're still a baby," her expression was very triumphant. I needed to put her in her place.

On that day, as usual, Ichigo had come on a Ponytail errand, looking for a sweatshirt with a Versace logo on it. After picking out a few likely candidates, she asked, "Could I borrow these for a little while?" When I said yes, she conscientiously replied, "Thanks for always being so cool about it." Even if given a fairly detailed description of a desired item and told to select whatever you think fits best, choosing one piece of clothing for someone else is a difficult business. So, if Ichigo came looking for a sweatshirt, I would hand her a few sweatshirts and tell her to show them to her friend. Her friend could pick the one she liked best, and Ichigo could return the other items to me on her next trip, with the payment made at the same time.

"Everyone's wearing the Versace stuff they got from you these days and looking really sharp. The Ponytails always were Shimotsuma's most kick-ass girl gang, but now we're even cooler."

"How many of you are there?"

"Well, aside from being the strongest Shimotsuma girl gang, we're the biggest, too. Right now, there's seven of us."

Just seven...? That's pretty pathetic.

"And how many Shimotsuma girl gangs are there?"

"Um, let's see. Including the really small ones, there's about three. There's a lot more guy gangs, though."

If the seven-member Ponytails was the biggest group, and the other two groups were smaller, saying the Ponytails were Shimotsuma's strongest girl gang may not have been a lie, but

it wasn't very impressive either. It was like coming from a middle school in some mountain village with only ten students in the whole school, and boasting that you'd been student council president. Or belonging to a baseball team that loses its very first game in the local qualifiers, and bragging that you were their ace pitcher. But if I said that, Ichigo would probably go ballistic and pitch a fit, so I decided to keep quiet.

"Hey, don't tell me you want to join our gang?"

As if that were even a remote possibility.

"If you wanna join I can give you an introduction, but you'd have to get a license first. And you'd have to dump those frilly-ass clothes. You gotta look cool, girl, put on something snazzy and tough, like a real Yanki. Plus, if you wanna be a Ponytail, we're basically just into riding, but you gotta be ready to land some punches cuz if anyone picks a fight with us, we give it back to 'em double. We don't do any paint thinner or drugs. We don't shake people down or bother regular folks. Oh, and we don't take any sluts, either. There's all kinds of Zokki gangs out there, but we're strictly hard-core bikers. You think you can stick to our rules, I'll put in a word with our boss."

I'm telling you, I don't want to join...

"If you wanna join but you're too scared to, don't be such a chickenshit. Sure, you break the team rules you're gonna get the crap beaten out of you. And if some other gang picks a fight, doesn't matter how big they are, we take them on. So yeah, you'll see blood for sure, and once in a while you might get hauled into the hospital with some broken bones and shit. But once you're in, everyone might look pretty scary, but most of the time they're really nice. And even a puny kid like you, they'll teach you how to fight. Cuz fighting isn't just about muscle, see. It's more about experience, and the rest is guts. Even if somebody's real big, and coming at you with a crowbar and stuff, if they don't have guts and you do, you'll always beat

them. So, how about it? You made up your mind?"

"I'm not joining."

"What the hell is there to think about?"

"There's nothing to think about. I will never become a Yanki, or ride a motorcycle, or fight anybody, or join a group of any kind, or take off what you call my frilly-ass clothes."

"Why not?"

"Because Yanki are so uncool."

"Did you just dis my entire life?"

"Well, yeah."

"I'll fucking kick your ass."

"Go ahead, if you want to."

"You ask me, you're the one who's uncool, wearing those frilly-ass outfits when you're in fucking high school already."

"They're not 'frilly-ass,' they're Lolita."

"What's the fucking difference?"

"There's a world of difference."

"I'll kill you, I swear."

"Go ahead."

When I said that, Ichigo abruptly stood up. *She's going to punch me*, I thought, *or kick me*. I hate pain, but I certainly was not going to apologize.

"You know, you wear those frilly-ass clothes, but you've got a lot of nerve, girl. A lot more nerve than some of those posing half-ass Yanki around town."

"You aren't going to kill me?"

"Nah. I owe you too much."

"You don't have to pay people back what you owe them. If you borrow something, make it yours and never give it back. That's *my* policy, so you don't have to worry about owing me anything."

"What're you talking about? You borrow something, you gotta give it back."

"Well, what's your most precious possession, Ichigo?"

"My bike, I guess."

"So if, let's say, the Ponytails' boss asked you to lend it to her, what would you do?"

"If Akimi-san asked me? That's a tough one. But to be honest, I wouldn't want to, even to her."

"Right. If something is really precious to you, it doesn't matter how much someone begs you, or who that person is, you don't want to lend it. So you *shouldn't* lend it. The only things you should lend people are things you don't really care about. And that's why my policy is never to return something I borrowed. But if I lend something, I do that knowing I might never get it back."

"Man, you've got a really bad personality."

"I know."

"Bet you don't have any friends."

"Nope."

"Don't you ever feel lonely?"

"Not really. If I have to make chit-chat with someone I don't even like very much, just because I'm lonely, I'd rather read a book or listen to music by myself."

"You're pretty tough."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You're tough."

"No, I'm not. I'm weak. And that's why I pretend to be tough. If I let myself be weak, inside myself, there'd be nothing left of me after a while. I think people shouldn't be too easy on themselves. I need to be tough on myself because I'm weak, that's all."

"You know, I really hate girlie-girl types like you, and you really piss me off sometimes, like, a lot, but still, it feels good to hang out with you, somehow. We aren't into any of the same things, and I totally don't understand you at all, but we can

talk for hours and it never gets to be a pain. I guess it's because you've got your own policies that you stick to, even if I don't get them."

"That's true, but you disapprove of them. Like my never returning things I borrow."

"Well, yeah, you're right about that. Hey, Momoko. What am I, to you?"

"A hicktown Yanki with bad taste."

"Watch it, kid, I really *am* gonna kill you. Look, that's not what I meant. Do you think of me as a friend, or just a customer who buys Versace stuff from you, or what?"

Being asked something like that straight out puts me in a bind. I have always hated promises and agreements that use someone else to validate one's own existence, as when girls say things like, "We're such good friends, aren't we?" To me, words like "friend" and "lover," and "parent" and "child," are equivalent to titles such as president, section chief, caretaker, and superintendent, and I have lived my life thinking they had no more meaning than such titles (which is why I've never, ever had a single friend, probably).

"I don't have any interest in things like friends and groups, so I can't say what you are to me, Ichigo."

"If you'd said you thought of me as a friend, I'da been kinda stoked, actually."

"Well, it's not as if I have any obligation to make you happy."

"You really are a bitch, you know that?"

"You're making me blush!"

"It wasn't praise, all right?!"

That day, as she was leaving, Ichigo discovered a scooter parked in Grandmother's garden shed. It was quite an old one, and was used by Grandmother when she needed to go shopping a little further away than usual. Grandmother had

no license to drive a scooter. In other words, she was riding it around without a license, but she never went out to the station or other crowded areas, so in spite of going out without a helmet, and neglecting to use her blinker when making a turn, she had never been stopped by the police. After all, traffic regulations meant absolutely nothing when it came to driving the roads around this house. This was an area where tractors felt free to use the major arteries.

"Hey, does this still run? It's too cool for words."

Ichigo gazed at the bike with sparkling eyes. The front section of the black body had white polka dots, while the sides had white stripes. You could call it cute, but you could also call it the worst taste ever. On its front was a big basket, probably affixed there by Grandmother to carry her shopping.

"This is vintage, man."

Ichigo told me that, rather than new models of cars and motorcycles, Yanki preferred older models which were no longer being sold, as riding around in these so-called "vintage" vehicles was considered much cooler. Remodeling a vintage and making it more elaborate than new cars and bikes was apparently what vintage freaks lived for. I could see that old cars and motorcycles might have value as "vintage" models, but this was just a plain old scooter, no matter how you looked at it, and nothing but.

"It's a DJ • 1R Viva You—that's a super-rare limited-edition model that Honda put out back in the '80s, when scooters ruled. I'd heard of it from the old man at the garage, but wow, I didn't know anyone was riding these anymore. It doesn't have any special features or anything, but it was considered pretty hot at the time because it was designed by this clothing maker called Viva You. See how it's got 'Viva You' in its name?"

"By 'Viva You,' you mean *that* Viva You?"

"Well, I don't really know a whole lot about them, actually."

Today, Viva You has switched to a safe line of easy-to-market clothes, but it had been a leading fashion house during the designer-brand craze of the 1980s. I had seen some of their things in old fashion magazines I'd purchased at a used-books store, and their clothes back then were quite darling, with Lolita-esque touches. Viva You's designer at the time was Hiromichi Nakano, who has his own eponymous brand today, where he continues to pursue his own particular vision of romanticism. I found myself gazing with fascination at the vintage scooter myself, for completely different reasons from Ichigo's.

"Who rides this?"

"My grandmother."

"Well, take good care of it. If she gets in an accident or something, don't just dump it or anything, you hear me? Call me first. I could take it to the garage and fix it up. Or if you didn't want it anymore, I'd buy it from you."

Without tiring at all (I tired of it immediately), Ichigo spent a long time peering at the Viva You bike from various angles and stroking it. *This girl really loves bikes*, I thought, quite impressed in spite of myself, and then I started getting irritated. *It's dark out already. I'm getting hungry. Go home, why don't you? I can't eat dinner with you around.*

There are no shops around my house besides a convenience store and a big appliance store. But, at the intersection of Routes 131 and 294, there suddenly pops up a relatively large coffee shop (I don't want to call it a "café"). The name of this coffee shop, which was built to look like a European castle, was "Forest of the Nobility." Since its exterior was rather medieval-looking, I decided to pay the place a visit. In keeping with its

name, there was classical music playing and it had rooms with stained-glass windows, and inside its exposed-wooden-beams interior there were vases and objects of Rococo sensibility, but no matter how hard it tried, it was basically a Shimotsuma coffee shop. The place was too casual. Most of the customers were families. A look at the menu revealed such beverages as "The Baron's Blended Coffee" and "Duchess's Choice Pineapple Juice," but if you ordered them, all you got was plain old coffee and juice made from concentrate. A grand piano was placed ostentatiously inside the entrance, but this too had nothing grand about it. What astonished me most was the large number of square paper cards of the type celebrities sign that were displayed behind the sofas in the waiting area. Wondering what sort of notables had dropped in at the Forest of the Nobility, I scrutinized each one, but found very few autographs. Instead, the writing on the cards turned out to be ads for a building contractor ("We're here for all of your housing needs!"), a medical clinic, and other businesses, or if not that, messages from local people ("Back in Shimotsuma for a memorial service. Great to be home after all these years!"). *And you call yourselves the Forest of the Nobility?! This is just the Thicket of the Hoi Polloi!* But since this was the closest such establishment to my house, I grudgingly availed myself of it every now and then. (If you ever find yourself in Shimotsuma, do pay it a visit. I just disparaged it right now, but actually I'm rather partial to the place. Long live the Forest of the Nobility!)

I often visited this coffee shop with Ichigo, as well. I usually stuck to black tea with milk, but Ichigo, in spite of being a "hard-core" Yanki, seemed to have a sweet tooth, and tended to order desserts with names like "Princess Grace of Monaco Parfait."

"You know, I'm crazy about Versace and stuff, like, it's the coolest brand around and I think it's totally swank and all...but

actually, if we're talking about Yanki clothes, my top favorite brand is Galfy."

That day, Ichigo was wearing something you could either call a jacket or the top half of a tracksuit, accentuated with leopard print and sporting the giant face of a dog with a bone, reminiscent of a Disney character, in the middle of both the front and back. This was a Galfy creation, and she had paired it with black bermuda shorts-type bottoms she said it had come with. Why was it that Yanki loved tracksuit-style clothing so much? Among the Versace fakes as well, tracksuit-type items were my perennial best-sellers.

"Where is Galfy sold?"

"Umm, at street stalls and places selling Yanki fashions."

"They don't have their own boutiques?"

"I don't know about that. I'm not sure. All I know is, they're based in Nagoya, I think."

"So where do *you* buy these clothes, Ichigo?"

"At Jusco."

Ichigo said this so flatly, as though it were self-evident, that I had to burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"But Jusco's just a supermarket!"

"You are so fucking clueless. The Shimotsuma Jusco is amazing, man. It's got Galfy, it's got brands that Yanki grads love, like Infinity and Santa Fe, it's like, the coolest place in town, if you ask us. Plus, everything's always on discount. You knock Jusco, you're just proving you don't know shit. I'm telling you, they got *everything* there. And their food section's open till eleven o'clock at night. If you're gonna be staying in Shimotsuma, you'll be going to Jusco yourself, no question about it."

"Is it big?"

"It's huge, man. It's even got two floors."

That's quite small, actually.

"So hey, where do you buy those weird, frilly-ass outfits of yours?"

I told Ichigo about my weekly visit to Baby, the Stars Shine Bright's boutique in Daikanyama.

"You go all the way to Tokyo? Wow, that's far. The only place I've ever been in Tokyo was Ueno. It was pretty far-out, though. They had stores selling Galfy, Versace, you name it. Just walking down Ame-yoko's pretty exciting, man. You're like, wow, I'm in the big city now!"

Not Shibuya, not Shinjuku, but Ueno—she worshipped Ueno. My heart bled for poor Ichigo.

"So hey, didn't you just say 'Daikanyama'? Where is that?"

"Near Shibuya."

"So if it's got 'yama' in its name, is it on a hill?"

"No. It's a really stylish neighborhood just one station away from Shibuya, and it's completely flat."

"Oh…"

When she finished eating her parfait, Ichigo folded her arms and closed her eyes.

"You know Daikanyama pretty well?"

"No, but I do go there every week to visit Baby's boutique."

"You know a shop in Daikanyama called Emma?"

"What kind of shop is it?"

"It's an embroidery place."

"An embroidery place?"

Who would have guessed that this Yanki had an interest in embroidery? People are not always what they seem.

"You're interested in embroidery, Ichigo?"

"Yeah."

"So you *are* a girl after all! Beadwork seems to be all the rage right now, doesn't it?"

"Uh, yeah? I'm not really up on that stuff."

"Oh, but it is. If you go to the crafts section of a bookstore,

all the embroidery books are about beadwork these days. Oh, that's right, can you tell me where's the best place in Shimotsuma for buying embroidery supplies?"

"Uh, I'm not really sure about that. Jusco, I guess."

"Oh, really? They have them at Jusco?"

"Yeah…"

"Oh, good. Then let's go to Jusco together sometime. Gosh, I never thought you'd like embroidery, Ichigo. How much can you do?"

"Uh…Well, I'm still a beginner, so I can only do scales."

"Scales?"

"…Yeah."

A beginner at embroidery, scales? Aren't scales what people do who just started learning the piano? She's lying about being able to do embroidery, isn't she? In order to test this notion, I asked her the following question.

"Hey, Ichigo. Don't you think the Russian embroidery needle is so much easier to use than the French?"

"Yeah, I guess I'd say Russian's easier."

Just as I'd thought: Ichigo knew absolutely nothing about embroidery. Who ever heard of a Russian embroidery needle? This led me to suspect that her information about Jusco being the best place to buy embroidery supplies was just thrown out in desperation. Since Jusco had everything, she figured that sending me to Jusco would be the safest bet.

"You are such a liar, Ichigo. You don't know the first thing about embroidery."

"Huh? Yes I do, so shut the fuck up."

"No, you don't. I mean, there is no such thing as a Russian embroidery needle."

"You bitch. That was a fucking trick question?"

"Well, you lied to me. Why did you say you know how to do embroidery, when you don't?"

"I just felt like it was too late to back out. Cuz you got all happy, talking about it and stuff."

"But if you can't do embroidery, why did you ask me about that embroidery shop?"

"I can't do it myself, but I want to get some done."

"On what? A handkerchief? A cushion?"

"On my kamikaze coat."

Ohhhh. People in biker gangs wear these strange garments that look like a cross between a long coat and fatigues. When they hold meetings, or drive around in packs, or have gang battles, or on any other special occasion, this is what they wear. Since Ichigo was a biker, she had a kamikaze coat. And come to think of it, kamikaze coats were always embroidered with lots of complicated kanji characters and bizarre pictures.

"I see. *That* kind of embroidery."

"Yeah, that kind of embroidery. The Ponytails' boss, Akimi-san, is getting married and graduating from the gang."

"Graduating from the gang? Does that mean she's moving up in the world and becoming a yakuza?"

"You dope! Graduating means you're retiring. So we're going to give her a big send-off parade, and I want to do something for her, to show my appreciation for all she's done for me."

"So give her some flowers."

"Yeah, right, give her flowers. It's a bikers' send-off parade, not some piano recital."

"Then how about a microwave or a washing machine? She's getting married, right?"

"That's not the kind of stuff you give somebody at a bikers' send-off parade. You just don't get it, man. A send-off parade, see, is where you get dressed in your sharpest duds and drive around in formation making a shitload of noise, sometimes with other gangs joining you too, if they're allies. That's our way of saying 'a river dirty' to the person who's graduating."

"I think you mean *arrivederci*, not 'a river dirty.'"

"Well, whatever. The point is, you're crying a river, right?"

"Crying a river? What are you talking about? Do you even know what *arrivederci* means, Ichigo?"

"Yeah. It means saying good-bye to someone while crying so hard you get snot all over the place. Like, you're crying a river and making it dirty with spit and snot, cuz you're gonna miss them so much."

"That is completely, totally wrong. *Arrivederci* is Italian, actually, and it means 'till we meet again.' You say it to someone who's leaving on a journey."

"Since when?"

"Since day one."

"Maybe that's just in Kansai."

"No, it means the same thing everywhere."

"Well, anyway!"

Perhaps out of embarrassment at her mistake, Ichigo suddenly raised her voice and thumped the table with the flat of her hands.

"The point is, that's what a send-off parade is, okay? Everyone puts on their kamikaze coats, flies their team flag on their bikes, and rides around. It's like, when they send up giant fireworks at the end of a festival, okay? And you want me to show up with a microwave tied to the back of my bike? Or a fucking washing machine? You couldn't even get one of those on the back of a 750. Look, that's not the kind of thing I want to give her, all right?"

"What do you want to give her, then?"

"See, Akimi-san's been really good to me. Even when everyone else would laugh at me for riding a scooter, Akimi-san never did. She's the one who taught me how to fight, and she's the one who taught me a lot about bikes. Tell you the truth, I only started in high school. Up through middle school, well,

my family's pretty strict and all, so I couldn't even be a Yanki, much less a Zokki, though I really wanted to. But I wasn't good in school either, and on top of that I was a wimp, so I was always getting sent out by the Yanki in my class to buy sodas and snacks for them and stuff. Total loser, basically. So then, when middle school was over, the only high school I could get into was Omeko, cuz I'm so dumb, right? So I was, like, facing three more years of getting shoved around and running errands for people, and I just couldn't take it. That last spring vacation before high school started, I was so fucking depressed. And that's when I met Akimi-san. One night I snuck out of the house—I just wanted to get away from it all, but I didn't have the guts to run away from home or anything, so I grabbed my bicycle and started pedaling real hard down Route 357. But then I got a flat tire, and I couldn't even deal with that...And I felt like, that was my whole life, right there: I take off, and I get a flat tire. I started crying, and I just couldn't stop. Finally I started pushing the bike back the way I came, and was walking along the road crying like that, when a biker gang passed me. They were revving their engines and making a whole lotta noise, and I stopped and watched their taillights zigzagging across the road and stuff.

"And then one of the bikes came back and stopped right in front of me. I was, like, oh shit, what's gonna happen to me now? At least the rider was a woman so I knew I wouldn't get raped, but I thought I might get beaten up or shaken down or something. She had long blond hair down to her waist, and she got off her bike and pulled her hair off her face, and then she squatted down and looked up at me. She goes, 'What happened? Why're you out here crying in the middle of the night? You're still in middle school, aren't you? Did some fuckwad Yanki dudes do something to you?' She goes, 'Well, you tell me what they looked like and I'll beat the shit out of them for

you.' And then I guess she could tell that wasn't it, cuz she said 'maybe not,' and asked me if I'd lost something. Yeah, that was Akimi-san.

"She had the nicest eyes I'd ever seen, like, really understanding, you know? And when she looked right at me with those eyes of hers, it made me start crying again. I don't know, I just started crying. And she goes, 'What's the matter? You scared? Worried? Frustrated? Are things tough for you? You can't take it anymore?' It was like she could see straight into me. And when I nodded yes, it felt like everything inside me, all the stuff that'd been bothering me, was gone. Like, poof. And after a little while, Akimi-san got up and put her hand on my head. And she goes, 'Everybody's got problems. Everybody's got someplace that hurts. You aren't the only one. So cry all you want, there's nothing to be ashamed about.' Then she goes, 'But women only cry when they're alone. Don't ever cry in front of anybody, cuz they'll feel sorry for you. A woman's gotta keep her pride. So if you wanna cry, do it in a place like this, where nobody's gonna see you. And cry your heart out, but for every tear you shed, grow that much stronger.'"

Here Ichigo closed her eyes, and faced the ceiling. I suppose the events of that night had come vividly back to her, and she was reliving her emotions. She tried to hide the tears that had pooled in her eyes, so I decided to pretend I hadn't seen them.

"And when she'd said that, Akimi-san got back on her bike and took off. Her bike was a black Long Fork Chopper-style Honda Steed, with glitter all over the body, and it had a long white tail she'd fixed to the back, with the kanji for 'Ponytails' on it in red. I watched Akimi-san ride off on that bike until I couldn't see her anymore. Man, I remember how beautiful her rainbow-colored taillights were. And that's when I decided I was gonna be a cool-ass woman like Akimi-san.

"So the first day of school, I show up at Omeko with blond

hair, short jacket, and a super-long skirt with thirty-two pleats in it. Like, everyone totally notices me, right? There were a bunch of people from my middle school there, so it got around real fast that I'd been a total fucking loser before. And sure enough, the moment the entrance ceremony's over I get called out back by five older girls and get the shit beaten out of me. But when they were punching me and kicking me and stuff, I just grit my teeth. And when they were done, they told me if a poser like me showed up again wearing tough clothes like that, they'd *really* kick my ass. But even though I could hardly stand up after, I wore the same outfit to school the next day. That time they stubbed a cigarette out on my right arm and knocked me around with a wooden sword, breaking one of my ribs. But I went to school the next day, wearing that same outfit.

"If your body hurts, you can go to the hospital and get it fixed, right? But if your soul hurts, no doctor in hell can help you. You gotta treat it yourself. So I decided to think of those beatings as a kind of punishment for being so wimpy before. And also as an initiation, which is what they were. So I didn't fight back. But the third day, I challenged the one who was the boss to a bare-knuckle one-on-one fight. Well, there was no way she could say no, right? I'd never fought anybody in my life, and I knew I didn't stand a chance against her, but I challenged her anyway. So she said yes, and when we were facing off I realized I didn't even know what to do. I didn't have a clue how to fight.

"She was all glaring at me and stuff, and waiting for me to make the first move. So I'm like, *fuck*! And then I remembered this Jackie Chan movie I saw on TV when I was little, and I kinda crouched down and held my arms in front of me all twisted up. And I hear her go, like, under her breath, 'Shit, she's gonna use kung-fu…,' and she kinda backs off, right? So I'm like, okay, I managed to scare her a little, and I step forward going, *acho*! And whaddaya know, she shrinks back and closes

her eyes! So this voice inside me shouts, *now*! and I grab her hair and pull it as hard as I can. She loses her balance and her face ends up right around my waist, so I try a kick, and like I'd been aiming for it or something, my knee lands smack in her nose. So now she's got blood all over her face and she's rolling around on the ground. The others think I broke her nose and start panicking, saying stuff like, 'She ain't just some poser, she's for real, we better get outta here if she's gonna be using kung-fu shit on us,' and they leave their boss lying there and take off.

"I'd won. My first fight, my very first hand-to-hand, and I totally won. The other girl's lying there shaking her head, like she's saying, 'no more,' and I sit my ass down next to her and go, 'If you fuck with me again tomorrow, I don't care if you're older than me or what, I'm seriously gonna kick your fucking ass.' And then I got up, and right before I walked away I said, real cool, 'You'll be sorry for this, bitch.'"

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but who said 'You'll be sorry for this'? You, or her?"

"How about listening when someone's fucking talking to you? *I* said it."

"But why?"

"Cuz that's what people always say at the end of a fight, that's why. Don't you know anything?"

"It's true that line comes at the end of a fight, but the one who says it is the one who lost."

"No way!"

Why was this person always like this? When she finally gets something right, she has to go and blow it. And she isn't even aware that she's blown it.

"And ever since, you've been a Yanki all the way."

"Uh, yeah, sort of...Hey, was that for real, what you just said? That it's the loser who says 'You'll be sorry for this'?"

"Yes. That line belongs to the pathetic loser, lying on the

ground and shaking his fist."

"Holy shit! That's what I always say when I win! Fuck, Momoko, what do I do now?"

"It's too late to do anything about it now."

"Thanks a lot, you heartless bitch."

"Well, you can't very well go around to everyone you fought and say, 'I take back that line,' can you? So anyway, go on with your story. People at school started respecting you, right? And then you turned sixteen and failed the test for an ordinary motorcycle license, but you got a scooter license and joined the Ponytails, right? You got to join Akimi-san's gang."

"Yeah."

Ichigo seemed quite deflated by my pointing out her mistake. She evidently had lost the strength to continue with her story.

"So Akimi-san was the one who set you on your way to becoming a Ponytail, or rather, to becoming who you are today, and she was really kind to you also after you joined the Ponytails, and you really look up to her and feel indebted to her, and that's why you want to give her something really special for her retirement, right? In a way befitting a biker."

"Yeah."

"So what does that have to do with that embroidery shop in Daikanyama?"

At these words, Ichigo seemed to regain her spirits.

"Right. Yeah, that's right. So. I gave it a lot of thought. Like, what would be the biggest gift I could give her as a Zokki? Or, like, what would be the best way to show her my appreciation? And what I came up with, see, is embroidery. I want to put some embroidery into my kamikaze coat for her send-off parade."

"What kind of embroidery?"

"I wanna put in writing that says, 'Thank you, Akimi-san.'"

"What?"

"What, what?"

"Not that I'm an expert on these things, but I thought the embroidery that bikers like to put on their kamikaze coats tends toward scary kanji phrases like 'killer fighter' or 'totally invincible' or 'diabolically evil.'"

"Yeah, so?"

"So I think 'Thank you, Akimi-san' just doesn't cut it. It's so serious and good-hearted, it'll make you look like a Girl Scout leader or something. You know, the type of person who sees an empty can on the side of the road and picks it up to throw in the trash."

"Yeah, but that's what I want to put."

"If you at least did it all in kanji, for example if you used *xie xie* for 'thank you,' and the kanji for 'praise' because that's pronounced 'san,' that would still look a lot better."

"What the hell's 'shay shay'? Makes me sound Chinese or something."

"Well yes, because that's how you say 'thank you' in Chinese."

"I don't like it. It's like, Akimi-san ordered some chow mein and sweet-and-sour pork or something, and I'm the goddamn waitress. It's not that kind of 'thank you,' okay? It's gotta be for real. I want her to know I mean it."

"But 'thank you' on a kamikaze coat just doesn't work. It isn't classy at all. It's just plain uncool."

"Okay, you're probably right about that. But see, I don't care if it isn't classy, or if it's uncool. I don't give a shit if everyone laughs at me, either. I mean, this is it, she's leaving. So I just want to send her off with words that come straight from the heart. Sure, us Yanki always act tough and try to be cool and all, but there's times you can drop it. In fact, there's times you *should* drop it."

If that's what Ichigo thought, far be it from me to tell her she was wrong. If she wanted to put "Thank you" on there, or "Can

I help you?" or "Have a nice day," or "Would that be for one night or two, madam?," or anything else, that was up to her.

"So I want this embroidery done really good, and that's why I want to go to this place called Emma in Daikanyama. It's legendary. All the bikers know about it, but nobody knows exactly where it is. The guy who runs it's supposed to be this awesome artist, like a total master, and all he does is biker embroidery, but he won't just take any job. He's gotta like you, and the design or wording you want, or else he won't do it, no matter how much you beg him or how much money you offer. But if he says yes, he works incredibly fast and his embroidery's so beautiful you think it's a work of God, like, it's really fine and delicate but also super-bold and powerful. He puts his soul into every stitch, see, and when he's done, the embroidery's, like, alive. So he hardly ever takes any jobs, cuz he loses a part of his soul every time, right? But I want to try asking him to do this for me. All I know is, he's in Daikanyama, but I want to find him and have him embroider my feelings for Akimi-san into my kamikaze coat for her send-off parade."

"Have you ever seen any of his work yourself, Ichigo?"

"No. In fact, I don't think any biker in Ibaraki's actually seen any of his stuff. I heard there was a biker gang boss in Gumma who had a kamikaze coat with this guy's embroidery on it, but that was twenty years ago or something. I mean, I wasn't even born yet."

"How old is this embroiderer?"

"Well, he's been around for a long time, so I guess he's pretty damn old."

"Maybe the reason nobody knows where his shop is, and nobody has seen his work recently, is that he's already dead."

"Don't say that, it's fucking bad luck! Okay, so I haven't seen his work myself, and I don't know anybody who's met him, either. But I hear stories about him all the time. Like, about a

year ago this biker came all the way from Hokkaido to see him, and actually found him, but couldn't get him to take the job. He went to see him every day for a whole week, and begged and begged, but he said no, so the guy finally went home empty-handed."

"So if you could find this person from Hokkaido, you could ask him where it is."

"Well no, cuz right after he got back to Hokkaido, he got in an accident and died."

"That story sounds really hokey. Isn't there anybody who's actually alive and has a kamikaze coat that was embroidered by this master? Because if there isn't, I bet he isn't just legendary, he's a legend, period. Like an urban myth."

"A what?"

"You know, stories like that ghost named Hanako in the school toilet and stuff."

"No, he definitely exists. There was this boss who unified all the girls' gangs in Kanagawa. She's retired now, but she was around until just a couple years ago, and her kamikaze coat had this master's embroidery on it. A dragon, on a red background."

"What's her name?"

"I don't know her real name, but everyone calls her Himiko."

"So let's find *her* and ask."

"We can't. All anyone knows is that she quit being a biker, and then she moved to Ibaraki. Nobody knows where, though."

"So *she* might as well not exist, either."

"Himiko exists, for sure. Nobody knows where to reach her, but tons of people in Ibaraki have seen her. I heard she lives around Tsuchiura someplace."

"Tons of people say they've seen Elvis, too. And the Loch Ness monster."

"Well anyway, next time you go to Daikanyama, take me along, will you?"

"I'll take you there, but I'm not helping you look for a place that might not even exist."

"Thanks a lot. What kind of friend are you, anyway?"

"No kind."

"Shit...Even if I *found* Emma, I don't have enough money to get the guy to do the work for me."

"How much does it cost?"

"Well, it depends on what you're getting. A brand-new kamikaze coat costs about seven thousand. If you get your team name embroidered on it, along with other stuff you need like some writing and designs, that'll come to at least fifty thousand."

"The embroidery costs more than the coat?"

"If you want to do it for cheap, you could use cut-outs and sew those on, but cut-outs and embroidery just ain't the same."

"But where do you get this stuff done usually? And where do they sell kamikaze coats in the first place? Do you get them at Jusco?"

"As if, you dope! You get them through mail order, what else?"

You're the one who said Jusco has everything.

"What are you, blind? You see ads for mail-order places in *Champ Road* and other mags all the time."

I don't even glance at publications aimed at a Yanki readership.

"And what about embroidery?"

"You ask the same mail-order places that sell kamikaze coats to do it for you. But it never turns out exactly the way you want. I mean, they're pros and all, so they'll do what you ask more or less, and they'll even give you advice like, 'If you're gonna put this writing in this space, it'll look tougher if the letters are bigger,' but when it's done it never looks the way you imagined it."

"And that's why you're looking for this legendary artist."

"Yeah. But man, I just don't have the cash. I mean, I don't know what his prices are, but he's a totally famous master. I figure I'll need at least a hundred thousand."

"How about getting an advance on your paycheck at the garage?"

"I just did that the other day."

"Then ask your father. Or your mother."

"No way. I hate borrowing money from my parents, makes me feel like I'm mooching or something."

"So mooch away. That's what parents are for. If you can't mooch off of them, what's the point of having parents in the first place? And remember, when you borrow money from your parents, you never have to pay it back. Even if you *can* pay it back, you never should. Being in debt to your parents is one of your duties as their child."

"Who told you *that*? I mean, jeez, the shit you come up with. You know, I've been wondering this ever since I met you, but where the hell did you get this fucked-up view of life, anyway?"

"From clothing."

"What, you went to a dressmaking school or something?"

"That's not what I meant. You see, ever since I started wearing Lolita fashions—what you call my 'frilly-ass' dresses—well, in my case it's mostly Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, but anyway, ever since I started wearing Baby's clothes, I realized that to carry them off properly—to truly do them justice—I'd have to improve myself, starting with my attitude toward life. Because if you dress like a Lolita without having the Lolita spirit, the clothes won't suit you. At all."

"Yeah. Like even if you wear the toughest-looking Yanki duds around, if you're just a half-ass, any full-on Yanki will spot you for a poser in two seconds."

"Exactly. And so, in order to hold my own against these clothes I love so much, I thought about what it means to live as a Lolita. I thought about it really hard, every single day. But I wasn't really on my own in my search for answers, because my clothes helped me. I have doubts about all kinds of things too, you know. I get scared and depressed like anyone else. But when that happens, my clothes tell me what to do. And their advice is always so simple, and logical, and just terribly useful. If I shared it with other people, they might say it's very egotistic or self-indulgent, but I've pledged to live as a Lolita, and for me their advice is perfectly on-the-mark."

"Your clothes talk to you?"

"They don't talk. If they did, my closet would be so noisy I wouldn't be able to sleep. That would be pure occult. So no, they don't talk, but they do tell me things. Like, sometimes when I go to Baby's boutique and see a dress I really want, it'll whisper, 'You aren't ready for me yet. Come back when you've got some more strength of character, and I'll be waiting for you.'"

"Huh. I don't totally understand it, but I kinda get what you're talking about. It's like, if I had a motorcycle license right now and found a really good deal on a CB400F, I probably wouldn't buy it. Cuz I know I'm not qualified to ride a bike that fine. Like, I'm not at the level yet, as a biker, to handle it right."

"Yes. Knowing that is how you show respect toward the things you love."

"Never thought I'd hear *you* use a word like 'respect.'"

"Actually, I would have preferred to say 'courtesy,' but I didn't think you'd know what it means."

"Treating me like an idiot again, you bitch."

"Well, can you tell me the difference between 'respect' and 'courtesy'? In a hundred words or less."

"Fuck you. Japanese is my worst subject."

"Then what's your best subject?"

"Sheet metal processing."

"That's right, you go to a technical high school. Lucky for you they offer that."

"Yeah, well, anyway. Look, about that embroidery, I wanna pay for it with money I earned myself, with my own blood, sweat, and tears. Cuz that's my way of showing respect to Akimi-san."

"Well, the fastest way would be to call a telephone dating club and con the money out of some old lech."

"Dirty money like that ain't gonna make Akimi-san happy. But the send-off parade's pretty fucking soon. Hey, I got it! Come on, let's go play pachinko. I can use the money I win there to pay for the embroidery job."

You just said it had to be money you earned with your own blood, sweat, and tears—did pachinko count as honest labor? I might have known there would be a deep dark gulf, or should I say, chasm, no, ocean, nay, a universe, between Ichigo's thought patterns and values, and mine.

"Come on, Momoko. We're going."

"But why do *I* have to go?"

"Cuz you're my fucking friend."

No, I'm not...

Totally ignoring my reluctance, however, Ichigo stood up energetically.

"Since you're coming along to help me out, I'll take care of the bill here."

She strode ahead toward the cash register, and as I started after her, I felt someone pulling my sleeve. I turned and saw a family seated at a table for four. The person detaining me was the father.

"Excuse me, but that spaghetti we ordered's taking a really long time."

Is that so? Well, appealing to me will get you nowhere.

"Um, I don't work here."

The man said, "Huh?" and irritably asked, "Then why're you wearing that uniform?" That day, I was wearing a black Baby blouse accented with black torchon lace, paired with a knee-length skirt, also with a lot of black torchon lace, and over this ensemble I had on a white apron with a heart-shaped bib, while on my head I wore a fairly restrained white headdress. This outfit had been coordinated with the aim of looking like a cute maid in the castle of a splendidly wealthy European aristocrat. So certainly, I could see how someone who doesn't know about Lolitas, or indeed, even someone who does, might mistake me for a waitress if they encountered me in an establishment of this kind. Ichigo meanwhile had finished paying, and seeing me thus detained, came flying over.

"Hey, pops. You got a problem with my friend here? Huh?"

"No. It's just that the spaghetti we ordered hasn't come yet, so I just asked her about it, that's all."

"Yeah, well she's a customer like yourself, all right? What's the matter, you can't tell the difference between a waitress and a customer? You blind or something? You need glasses? Or maybe you got a lot of gummy stuff in your eyes, cuz nobody would look at her and think she...uh, wait a minute, *anybody*'d look at you and think you're a waitress. Why're you wearing that dumb outfit, you dope?"

Ichigo punched me lightly on the head. Then she turned to the man and said, "If your spaghetti ain't here, go to the kitchen and make it yourself. Don't go around leaving everything to other people to do, all right?" And, with these words that nobody could help but question, she grabbed my arm and marched out of the Forest of the Nobility.

Since the area around my place of residence is pastoral (which sounds nice and Rococoesque, but actually it's just Nowheresville), there were no pachinko parlors in the vicinity.

"We'll go out to the station. Here, get on the back of my bike."

Was what Ichigo said, but for a Lolita to ride on the back of a souped-up Zokki vehicle was unpardonable. I refused her offer, saying, "Go ahead without me. I'll walk."

"Okay. I'll be at this pachinko place on the south side of the station, called Parlor Win-Win."

Who had come up with a crude name like that? But you probably had to go with something that obvious in Shimotsuma, or you wouldn't get any business. Well, it was a real bother to walk all the way to the station, and, the establishment's name notwithstanding, I didn't think it would be so easy to win a lot of money at pachinko, so I considered blowing Ichigo off and going home, but I am a very good girl: I headed toward the station. Size-wise, Parlor Win-Win turned out to be quite a large establishment, but it didn't have very many customers. I have no interest whatsoever in pachinko, and had only ever stepped inside such a place a few times in my life, back in Amagasaki, to use the ladies' room. Still, I sensed immediately that Parlor Win-Win was rather different in ambience from pachinko places in Amagasaki. Shopping arcades in Amagasaki are packed with pachinko parlors, every single one of them filled with customers from morning to night, and every single customer faced their pachinko machine with an almost murderous intensity. In Amagasaki pachinko was not an amusement but an easy means of earning a living. It was perfectly commonplace to see people lose their cool and punch the glass front of their machine if the balls didn't go where they wanted. In Shimotsuma, I didn't sense that kind of urgency. Although most of the customers were wearing

Yanki-style tracksuits, none of them had the air of someone whose very life depended on the outcome of the game.

When I arrived at Parlor Win-Win, Ichigo had not yet chosen which machine to play, and was meticulously inspecting each one.

"Yo, that was pretty fast for on foot."

"Hey, are you really sure you can make money from pachinko?"

"Just watch me, girl."

The interior of a pachinko parlor has long lines of machines stretching from front to back with aisles cutting across them to form blocks, and every block has a different model of machine. As I slowly made my way around the establishment with Ichigo, wondering at the enormous variety of machines available, I came to a block with machines featuring characters from the *Tensai Bakabon* anime. They were actually kind of cute.

"Ichigo. These are cute."

"Those suck. Well actually, what I mean is, none of the machines on this block's gonna be a winner today."

"How do you know?"

"See how there's people in here today, but none of them's on these machines? That's cuz they're set to be losers today, and all the regulars know that."

"Oh."

"See, the management programs the machines to spew balls or swallow them, depending on the time of day, or which day of the week, or if they just brought in new models, or whatever. So all you have to do is figure out which machines are set to spew, and you're on easy street. But if you end up with a machine that's set to swallow everything, you can just forget it—sit there all day, it ain't gonna give you shit. The thing about pachinko, see, is it's gambling but it ain't like horses or boat races where chance can figure in who wins or loses. That's why you gotta

be real careful when you choose your machine. See how there's this data displayed over every one?"

Ichigo pointed at the digital number displays above each machine.

"This one tells you how many times this machine hit the jackpot today, and this one tells you how many times these graphics in the middle of the machine rotated since the last jackpot, which gives you an idea when it'll hit the jackpot again. And over here, this one tells you how many times this machine hit the jackpot yesterday. You look at the data, and at the angles of all the little pins on the panel, to figure out which one's gonna be a winner."

Watching Ichigo move from machine to machine, scrutinizing each one with penetrating concentration, I thought she looked a little cool.

"Okay, let's play it safe and go with this one."

Ichigo reached into her pocket and took out a pack of Seven Stars cigarettes and a Zippo lighter decorated with a *hanafuda* pattern (take any small possession of Ichigo's, and her appallingly bad taste explodes forth from it), and tossed them into a plastic receptacle at the base of the machine she had selected, which was ostensibly put there to catch the balls that would come out of it. Then she strode toward the entrance of the establishment. I followed her there, and watched her insert a ten thousand yen bill into a vending machine. She pushed a button that said "¥5,000," and the machine produced a five thousand yen bill as change and a magnetic card resembling a pay phone card. Ichigo thrust the change into her pocket, clamped the card between her teeth, and without a word made her way rapidly back to her machine, where she sat down and inserted the card into a slot on its side.

"You have to buy a card first to play pachinko?"

"There's two kinds of machines—this kind, where you buy a card and use that to buy balls, and another kind where you just stick cash straight into the machine. The cash machines are harder to figure out if they're gonna be winners or not. But if you hit the jackpot on one of those, it's a total bonanza. I heard the real pros, the ones who're full-on gamblers, always go for the cash machines. But nowadays it's mostly card machines, which give you a steadier chance of hitting the jackpot. So like, this 'Sea Story' model I'm on will never give you a huge mega-jackpot, but if you stick with it, you can pretty much count on winning at least once."

"But Ichigo, you spent five thousand yen on this card. Are you sure about this? They had two thousand yen cards, too. It's way too risky to throw five thousand into this machine right off the bat. I mean, what if you hit the jackpot right after you start? That would be a total waste of money."

"Look, if they gave out jackpots on just a couple thousand yen's worth, they'd go bust. See, amateurs always think small and start out with a two thousand yen card. They play their two thousands' worth, and have a dozen balls come out a few times, but it never really spews. So their two thousand went down the toilet, but they think if they keep playing just a little longer, they'll hit it for sure, plus they wanna win back what they lost, right? So they shell out another two or three thousand. Sometimes they hit the jackpot on their second try, sometimes they don't. If they do they figure they lucked out, and if they don't, they give up. But see, the last thing you should do when you don't win is quit right there. These guys have their customers' psychology totally figured out. The average limit a punter can live with losing is five thousand. If they blow five thousand, they either figure the machine they're on is no good, or that it's just not their lucky day, and they go home. They don't have the guts to put more money into a machine that's already lost them

five thousand yen. But that's exactly what the management wants, cuz then they got your money without paying anything out. So what you do, see, is lose five thousand first, and then you put in a little bit more. That's when you hit it big-time, see? Cuz that's how these machines are programmed. So if you read how the management's reading their customers, you can make some money.

"Look at this aisle we're on. Hardly any empty seats, right? That's the proof that these machines've been hitting pretty constantly today. Here, check out the data on my machine. See that? Ten jackpots, 323 rotations. Anyone who plays a lot of pachinko knows that 'Sea' needs at least four hundred rotations before it gives you a jackpot. So I don't know how much the guy before me put into this machine, but he did me a big favor by quitting before it went around four hundred times. Thanks to him, I just have to make it turn another seventy-seven times and I'm automatically hitting the jackpot."

"Are you sure it always works out like that?"

"Hey, you're talking to a pro, girlie."

And since when are you *a pachinko professional...girlie*? It was true that Ichigo's explanation was logical and well-argued. Ordinarily exposing the glaring gaps in her intelligence and education with little to no provocation, when it came to pachinko, Ichigo seemed to be setting about the business of winning with a coolly analytical mind. Being a complete novice to pachinko, I had no way of judging how accurate her reasoning was, but basically, Ichigo was using her own money to play, so I had no reason to stop her from doing whatever she wanted. As for myself, I had nothing better to do than watch Ichigo light a cigarette, roll her shoulders a few times, slouch down low in her chair, and start turning the knob with a practiced hand to send the little metal balls out onto the pins. There was a hole marked "Start" under the computer graphics on the front

panel, and if a ball went into it, the three fishes standing in a row in the middle of the screen started moving. I understood that this was the "rotation" Ichigo had been talking about. The fishes had numbers on their bodies, and I also understood, after watching idly for a little longer, that if the three fishes sported the same number when they stopped rotating, this would be the "jackpot" she was hoping for. But this was only the most basic rule of the game. It seemed that the constantly changing backdrop of the graphics had some meaning as well. Whenever the backdrop suddenly shone with the colors of the rainbow, or a girl appeared in the picture, Ichigo would shout, "Yeah!" or "All right!" or "Here it comes!" and then, immediately afterwards, "Shit!" or "Fuck you!" or "No fucking way..." In front of my eyes, the balls Ichigo had gotten for her five thousand yen dwindled to fewer and fewer.

"What the fuck's up with this? If it doesn't spew after four hundred rotations, it's definitely supposed to after six hundred. Everybody fucking knows that. Well, I'm way over six hundred."

Ichigo stared dumbfounded at the panel. She had no balls left. In spite of taking the utmost care in choosing her machine, Ichigo had blown five thousand yen in the space of about fifteen minutes.

"I'll just try putting in another three thousand. There's no way it won't deliver after I made it rotate this many times. There's just no way."

She got up and started walking briskly toward the card vending machine. As she stuck another bill into it, I asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah, I just have to stick with it a little longer. I quit here, I'm just a chump."

"I have a feeling that the machine you're on is a loser."

"That's cuz you're an amateur, see? The pins're angled to let

the balls in easy on that one, so it's programmed to hit less, that's all."

With those words, Ichigo returned to the battlefront to lead another charge. I had gotten bored with watching her play, so to satisfy my curiosity I purchased a card for two thousand yen and decided to see for myself what this pachinko thing was all about. I didn't understand any of it anyway, so I went to the block with the *Tensai Bakabon* machines that Ichigo had declared to be hopeless today, since I could keep an eye on her from there. Ichigo had said to look at the data and the pins to choose a machine, but to me these things meant nothing. So, I simply went "eenie meenie minie moe" between the ones that were free, and sat down for my maiden pachinko experience at the one where my finger ended up. I inserted my card and, remembering what I'd seen Ichigo do earlier, pushed the button by the knob. A lot of little metal balls flowed into the higher of the two trays at the base of the machine.

"Hey, Momoko! Forget it! That one's a total loser!"

Ichigo had noticed that I was about to start playing, and was yelling across the aisle at me. But I didn't care if nothing came out of my machine—I was only doing this to kill time. Pretending I hadn't heard Ichigo's voice over the music blaring out of the sound system and all the noises emitted by the different types of machines, I commenced playing. I turned the knob with my right hand, and balls sprang out onto the panel in rapid succession. By adjusting how far I turned the knob I could control the arc of the balls, but there were so many pins crowded together on the panel, and the balls would hit them and ricochet off in so many directions, that I simply couldn't tell what was the best position to hold the knob. Even so, some of the balls managed to enter the hole marked "Start" under the CG picture (called the "chucker," apparently), sending the graphics into rotation. Various characters from *Tensai Bakabon*

appeared, and while it was pretty fun watching all this movement on the screen, I utterly failed to understand the pleasures of pachinko as a game (or as gambling). When three-fourths of my balls had been sucked into the machine (in almost no time at all), I decided that pachinko was idiotic and I would never play it again for the rest of my life—with two thousand yen, I could have gone to a convenience store and bought six packs of that candy that comes with those delightful Alice in Wonderland figurines. "Never again!" I swore to myself, and turned the knob to send forth my remaining five hundred yen's worth of balls. A split second later, the graphics underwent an unmistakable transformation.

The screen went yellow for a moment, and then a waterfall appeared, followed by Bakabon and Bakabon's dad. *What? What? What is going on here?!* And then three sevens lined up on the screen, and the voice of Bakabon's dad said, "Yup, you've hit the jackpot!" A lid at the center-bottom of the panel with the words "Yup, it's Open Sesame!" on it opened up, and all the balls I had flipped were sucked into it, and hundreds of balls gushed into the top tray until it was spilling over, with the overflow automatically falling down into the lower tray. But at the rate this was going, even the lower tray would be full of balls in no time. At a complete loss for what to do, I yelled out as loud as I could.

"Ichigo! Help! Ichigo! This is going crazy! Something's wrong here!"

The moment she heard me, Ichigo came rushing over.

"There's something wrong with this machine, Ichigo. Do something!"

"You fucking hit the jackpot, you dope!"

"It's frightening."

"Ain't a damn thing frightening about it! Check it out, your bottom tray's full. Hurry up and empty it into the dollar box

under it, or the balls'll get stuck and the machine'll break down."

For a jackpot virgin such as myself, the raging avalanche of balls coming out of the machine was truly terrifying. It seemed like the machine had gone haywire, and it made me panic. It was just like that old folk tale, you know the one—where there was a stone hand mill that would give you anything you wanted when you turned it, and this evil old woman conned it away from the good young man and took it off to sea in a little boat, and started producing salt with it, but then she didn't know how to make it stop, and the salt just kept coming and coming until the boat sank under its weight, and the old woman drowned to death, and even so the mill kept producing salt, and that's why the sea is salty. I was seized with dread that the pachinko balls gushing out of my machine would fill the entire parlor, and I would drown in a sea of balls.

"You just keep playing, got it? I'll empty the bottom tray for you."

Tears swimming in my eyes, I did as Ichigo ordered and turned the knob to send out more balls. After a while the graphics calmed down and went back to normal, and the lid saying "Yup, it's Open Sesame!" closed again. This was at least somewhat reassuring, and I let go of the knob. But my relief was short-lived, for Ichigo's voice immediately thundered out from behind me.

"What the hell're you resting for, you goddamn idiot? You're in triple-chance mode right now!"

"What's that?"

"It means if you keep going, you'll hit another jackpot for sure."

"But I don't want to!"

"Of course you want to, dickhead. What's the matter with you, you hit the jackpot and you start crying? Just keep going!"

I was forced to keep playing. And just as Ichigo had said, after a while the numbers lined up again, and the voice of Bakabon's dad said, "Yup, you've hit the jackpot!"

"I don't like this, Ichigo, it's scary. You take over for me."

"That's against the rules. I'd love to do it, but you're the one who hit the jackpot, so you're the one who's gotta keep playing. Come on, there's nothing scary about it. Just keep going."

Ichigo pushed a white button that was next to the data display, and a guy in a black vest, a parlor employee, came over. He swiftly pulled aside the dollar box placed under the bottom tray of the machine and slid an empty one just like it into its place. He said "Congratulations," and bowed. Ichigo emptied the full tray into the dollar box.

"Listen, now you've done it twice so you're getting the hang of it, right? When the bottom tray fills up, you pull this lever and the balls fall into the dollar box down here. One jackpot will fill the box, but no matter how big of a bonanza you get, there'll never be more balls than that, so just relax. Okay, so you got a second jackpot. Now, it probably ain't gonna happen, but if you go into triple-chance mode again, you'll hit a third jackpot. And if that happens, you push this white button, all right? Then a guy from the parlor'll show up again with an empty box and stick it under there for you. You got that?"

"I got it, but I don't really *get* it. I won't go into that triple-chance thing again, will I? It was really scary."

"Probably not. I mean, with this model of machine, that hardly ever happens unless they've programmed it to really go nuts. But hell, who the fuck knows? I figure you're almost done with this round, but...hey, wait a minute. You've gone into triple-chance again. Shit, man, talk about lucking out!"

"I don't care. I'm quitting."

"What the hell kind of idiot quits when they're in the middle of a lucky break?"

"This kind sitting right here."

"Don't talk shit and just keep going, you hear me?"

Ichigo punched me on the head, really hard. Holding back my tears, I kept my hand on the knob.

"I'll keep going like you said, so just don't go away, Ichigo. Stay here and watch."

"Jeez, you're such a fucking baby. Fine, I'll stay right here. But you empty the tray and all that stuff yourself, cuz if I help you out too much, they'll think we're working some kind of con."

The machine just kept going into "triple-chance" mode, over and over. It was unstoppable. I kept hearing "Yup, you've hit the jackpot!" and playing and pushing the white button to call the guy for what felt like an eternity. How many hours had I been sitting in front of that machine with my hand on the knob? When I finally let go of it, after the last triple-chance was over and Ichigo said I could stop, I turned around and saw fourteen dollar boxes filled to the brim with balls, piled one on top of the other.

"Holy shit. What's up with this machine? I've never seen anything like it. I never even *heard* of anything like it."

"I'm allowed to stop playing now?"

"Yeah, there's no way in hell it would give you any more jackpots. And even if it would, I think it's about time we got out of here. Let's go ahead and exchange these, okay?"

Ichigo pushed the white button I had been putting to so much use, and again a guy in a black vest appeared. Ichigo said, "She's done," and he said, "Please wait a moment," and sped off.

"We just wait here, and they bring us a cart. We pile all these dollar boxes on it, take 'em over to the counting machine, and then you get to trade 'em for prizes."

Instead of a cart, however, the guy brought with him a scary-looking older man, who seemed to be the manager.

"Hey, missy. Come here all dressed up like a baby doll to pull a fast one on us, huh?"

His manner was very intimidating, but I didn't understand what he was saying.

"She ain't pulled shit," Ichigo responded for me.

"You two working this together, are you? I don't know what you're using, girlies, but you're making a big mistake if you think you're taking us for a ride."

"I told you, we ain't done shit."

"Look, I know for a fact you threw the ROM out of whack. So if you don't mind, ladies, I'm going to have to search you both."

It appeared he suspected me and Ichigo of using some sort of foul play to make the machine spew out balls.

"Stand up, please, and empty your pockets. Hey, I'm talking to *both* of you, blondie."

"You better watch it, gramps. You mess with me, I'll beat the shit out of you."

"I said, empty your pockets, please."

He could say it all he wanted, but there was not a pocket to be found on what I was wearing. Ichigo's tracksuit-type outfit had pockets, though. She pulled out her cell phone, cigarettes and lighter, a few bills, and some change, and scowled at him, saying, "Who's got what where?"

"Now let's take a look at this young lady's bag."

So saying, the manager grabbed my white Baby handbag. He opened it and started rummaging around inside.

"You found anything yet, you old scumbag? Huh? Hey, I asked you a question, asshole."

Ichigo kicked the wall. The manager glared at her.

"We'll have to do a closer search in the office. Hey, you there, take these two to the office."

The guy who'd come earlier, and another guy in a black vest who'd materialized out of nowhere, grabbed our arms—at

which very instant, a menacing voice was heard from behind the manager.

"Hey mister, these girls ain't done nothing. I've been watching them the whole time. Seems to me you guys messed up your programming. You do any more searchin', you're just gonna end up with a lot of egg on your face."

The voice belonged to a tall young man with slicked-back hair and piercing eyes, who had on a black T-shirt with a blue satin baseball jacket draped over his shoulders. Around his neck was a thick gold necklace, and on his left earlobe he had a row of three studs. His right arm was tattooed with a red rose.

"And let's say they *did* use something. If you guys couldn't catch 'em doing it when they were doing it, you lose. Ain't that right? That's just how it goes in this game, mister. You guys let them pile up the dollar boxes, and *then* you start harassing them about cheatin'? That ain't right, and you know it."

The manager looked down at the floor. He didn't seem to have any retort to what the guy had said.

"Well, all right. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt this time. But looks to me like you're both underage, aren't you? I assume you know there's a law saying you can't play pachinko till you're eighteen, ladies."

"Yeah, well we're eighteen."

"*You* might pass for eighteen, missy, but nobody's gonna believe your friend here's out of high school. Heck, she could still be in middle school."

"Oh yeah? Well, she just looks younger than she is. She only looks like a kid cuz she's wearing these frilly-ass clothes, but actually she's over thirty."

Why go so far over the top? What's wrong with making me eighteen, too? There is no way in hell anyone would ever take me for a "young-looking" thirty-something, silly. You are so, so, so, so stupid!

"So now they're underage? Well, how many hours did you guys let these minors play without saying a word about it? Cops might wanna know."

The same guy who'd spoken up before suppressed a smile as he said this. And then, two beats later, he furrowed his brow, grabbed the manager by his lapels, and murmured, "So you lost a little money, asshole. Live with it. Don't go pushing people around over this shit, you got that? You pull this kind of crap every time somebody gets a little lucky, I'm gonna run you out of business, motherfucker. This is how the hardworking citizens of this country like to relax, all right? We're Parlor Win-Win, where everybody wins, remember? Now cut the lame-ass excuses, and count those motherfucking balls."

The manager opened both eyes wide and nodded repeatedly, his mouth snapping open and closed like a dying goldfish. When he was finally released from the guy's grip, he grudgingly instructed his employees to load the dollar boxes onto the cart and take them over to the counting machine. My balls were dumped into the funnel-like opening of the automatic counter, and I received a receipt. All of us—I, Ichigo, the manager, and the guy who for some reason had come to our rescue—peered at the number the machine had arrived at. And then Ichigo snatched the receipt from me like it was hers and turned to the manager, who was glowering at us balefully.

"You'll be sorry for this, asshole."

No...Ichigo...I told you, that isn't what you say...

Ichigo and I headed to the prize counter. The shelves behind it displayed phony-looking brand-name bags, electric rice cookers, enormous stuffed animal toys, and other sundry items. Ichigo handed my receipt to the girl there, who asked, "Is this for exchange?" Ichigo simply nodded, and the girl brought out a huge number of tags, which she placed in a plastic bag.

"You still have eighty-two balls left."

"Sevens and candy."

The girl added a pack of Seven Stars and a dime-store lollypop that looked chock-full of artificial coloring to the contents of the plastic bag.

"Hey thanks, pops."

Ichigo took the pack of Seven Stars out of the bag and tossed it to the guy in the blue satin baseball jacket, who had taken the trouble of following us to the prize counter and was hovering nearby like a bodyguard. He caught the cigarettes and smiled.

"Ichigo? What are all those tags?"

"They're magic tags."

"Do they levitate?"

"No, you dope. These are what you call 'special prizes.'"

"What's so special about them?"

"Just follow me and you'll find out."

Ichigo exited Parlor Win-Win, crossed the street in front of it, and entered a narrow alley. A small prefab hut with a glass window in front was the only thing in it, and when Ichigo thrust the bag at the window, the person inside the hut took it from her and started counting the tags. When he was finished, he handed her some bills. The moment she'd received them, Ichigo turned to me with a joyous smile and shouted, "Seventy thousand yen!"

"What? Seventy thousand yen? How?"

"I ain't tellin' you cuz it's a pain to explain."

"What were those tags? And that hut?"

"You trade the balls for the special prizes. You take the special prizes to the right place, they buy them from you at the right price. Get it?"

"More or less."

"How much did you put in?"

"Two thousand."

"So two thousand turned into seventy thousand. Talk about multiplying like rabbits out of a hat."

"It's 'multiplying like rabbits,' period. And 'pulling rabbits out of a hat.'"

"Yeah, well, show me a magician who could pull something like *this*."

Ichigo stuck the bills out at me. I took them, but with some hesitation.

"You take half of this, Ichigo."

"How come?"

"Well, you're the one who brought me to that pachinko parlor in the first place, and if you hadn't come over and helped me when I hit the jackpot, I would've just panicked and done nothing."

"I ain't takin' a commission off of a friend of mine, no way. You earned that money yourself."

"It's not a commission. And anyway, you're the one who needs money right now."

"Thanks for the thought, girl, but I can't take it."

"Why not?"

"Cuz that's my policy, that's why."

"Well, if that's your policy, I guess there's nothing I can say."

"Nope."

"So I'll lend it to you."

"..."

"Here, I'll lend you thirty-five thousand."

"You're so fucking stupid."

"Yes, I am."

"Okay, then I'll borrow thirty thousand. But I swear I'm gonna pay you back. Cuz unlike you, I always return stuff I borrow."

"I know."

It was completely dark out. And for some reason, when we finished sorting out what to do with the money, the whole thing suddenly struck us as being incredibly hilarious. We collapsed on the side of the road and, looking up at the starry sky of Shimotsuma, just laughed and laughed and laughed.

I wanted to find out where Emma, the legendary embroidery artist's legendary place of business, was located—and if in fact it actually existed—so I tried searching for it on the Internet. I got far too many results to wade through with only "embroidery" and "Emma" as my keywords, so I added "Daikanyama" and tried again. This time I got zero results. So then I tried various Yanki-related keywords, such as "Bosozoku," "Yanki," "Zokki," "riders," "killer fighter," "Yokohama Ginbae," "yo-ro-shi-ku," "Nameneko," and "Shizuka Kudo," hoping to arrive at information on Emma that way, but found few helpful Yanki-related websites. The only halfway-decent Yanki- or Bosozoku-related sites were all put out by non-Yanki to publish their observations and theories regarding the Yanki species. There were almost no websites put out for Yanki by Yanki, current or former, that were of any use. This was because, while Yanki might have cell phones and work on their bikes themselves, they generally do not own computers or use the Internet. Evidently, their primary form of communication is the grapevine.

While I was at it, I decided to do some research into that legendary (the word "legendary," for some reason, seems to be a great favorite among Yanki) personage called Himiko who was said to own a kamikaze coat embroidered by the Emma master. She was mentioned in quite a lot of sites, but none of the

information went beyond mere rumor, and all of it was slightly contradictory. Nevertheless, I shall summarize my findings to offer you a profile of this woman named Himiko.

Himiko—age and place of birth, unknown. In the early 1990s, when Bosozoku and Yanki were overtaken by street gangs called "teamers" and heading toward extinction in urban areas, there was still a small minority of people who remained true to the Bosozoku tradition and kept alive the old biker gangs. Ridiculed by the rest of society for being behind the times, however, little by little they began to lose their sense of purpose and identity. In Kanagawa prefecture particularly, long known for its large number of hard-core biker gangs, such rudderless Zokki got involved in a lot of meaningless turf wars and serious crime. It was in this climate of breakdown that the woman called Himiko suddenly appeared.

Some say she was the daughter of the first boss of the legendary Black Emperors, the largest and strongest Bosozoku gang in history, while others say she was the sister of the last boss in charge when the Emperors disbanded in 1992. She had been picked up countless times for juvenile offenses, and because of her seven stints in detention centers and two stints in reform school, nobody knew exactly how old she was. When she emerged from her second stay in reform school, she found out about the declining state of the Bosozoku and immediately formed her own small girl-biker gang, with just five members. However, she did not give her gang a name. Instead, each of the members wore a red kamikaze coat with a large dragon embroidered on the back in gold thread. Under Himiko's command, the four other members—later known as the Four Dragons—brought under control all the Kanagawa-based girl gangs, large and small, old and new. While they turned a blind eye to paint thinner and grass, teams that used or sold amphetamines were mercilessly crushed. Prostitution was allowed

on an individual basis, but if a gang was found pimping ordinary minors for "paid dates" and taking a commission on it—i.e. making a business of prostitution—they were pulverized to the point of utter destruction. It was Himiko's contention that unless you were strictly hard-core, you had no right being a biker.

With Himiko's appearance on the scene, the directionless biker chicks of Kanagawa began finding their way back to the path from which they had strayed. And, with a ringing endorsement of Himiko's views, they declared their wish to come together as one huge team with Himiko as their leader. Himiko, however, adamantly rejected this request, saying she had not disciplined Kanagawa's girl gangs with the aim of reigning over an organized biker force. If that had been her purpose—if she had wanted to unify the scattered teams to create the biggest, strongest gang around—she would first have given her own small team a name. The reason she hadn't, she said, was that domination was not her goal—but whoever wanted to ride alongside her and the others with a dragon on their backs was welcome to do that. These words of Himiko's became known beyond Kanagawa, and whenever word got around that Himiko was riding that night, biker chicks from all over would converge on Kanagawa. For this reason, on the nights that Himiko got on her black Kawasaki Z400FX with its straight Moriwaki muffler, white three-stage seat, and white feather-shaped extra-long tail, the roads of Kanagawa would be choked with legions of biker chicks.

While there were guys' teams and mixed teams that supported what this Himiko-led pack of girls was doing, and tried to form alliances with them, there were also some gangs that plotted their annihilation. And in every clash with an anti-Himiko gang, Himiko would demand a one-on-one contest with the gang's boss. Sometimes this would be settled by a race,

while other times it would be a no-holds-barred fight, weapons included. But not even the toughest, baddest, meanest biker dude around could ever win against Himiko.

And yet, suddenly one day, Himiko simply disappeared from the Kanagawa biker scene. It all started when a mixed guys-and-girls team came to her and said they were involved in drugs and prostitution, but wanted out. The problem was, their racket was controlled by a yakuza gang, and if they quit, they would face a vicious reprisal. Himiko went off alone to storm the headquarters of this yakuza gang, which was by no means the smallest in Kanagawa. They went at her with samurai swords and guns, but she didn't bat an eye. With just a wooden sword as her weapon she demolished the gang, doing serious damage to over twenty mobsters and, if you counted those who got away with only light injuries, overcoming more than fifty hardened men. As to what happened to her after that, some say she got sent back to reform school, while others say she got away, with someone's help, to someplace safe where the police wouldn't find her. Some accounts, meanwhile, had her and the yakuza boss stabbing each other to death during the battle.

So that in a nutshell was the Legend of Himiko, but once it reached the point of where she was now, the accounts suddenly veered off in a thousand directions and it was impossible to determine which was the most reliable. One person saw her riding her legendary Z400FX in Furano, Hokkaido, on a road that runs through acres of lavender fields. Another claimed she was now the president of a construction company she had started in Hakata, Kyushu. Yet another said she'd gone to America, where she'd entered a special forces unit to put her combat skills to use, and was now a crack anti-terrorist commando. She had become a housewife and was living in Sendai, where she had a part-time job as a supermarket cashier. She was a medium channeling spirits on the sacred mountain of

Osorezan in Aomori. Kaijin "Thunder" Liger, a masked pro wrestler on the Michinoku circuit, was actually Himiko. In other words, the stories ran the gamut from plausible to as-if-that-would-ever-happen ridiculous, and basically, when it came to Himiko's present whereabouts and doings, people were saying whatever they pleased.

The most cockeyed story was one I found on a forum, where someone wrote that John F. Kennedy's assassin had in fact been Himiko. You got your dates all wrong, you doofus. How could Himiko, who disappeared in the 1990s, manage to go back in time and kill an American president in 1963, for cryin' out loud? Well anyway, all this just showed that Himiko had attained the status of a goddess among Yanki, and basically, Osaka Yanki all thought she lived in Osaka, Gumma Yanki all thought she had ended up in Gumma, and without a doubt, Ibaraki Yanki all thought (or wanted to think) that Himiko was now in Ibaraki.

"Hey, you know the other day at pachinko? Why'd you pick that machine?"

"Because."

"Well, I've been thinking. Like, maybe you got some kind of god-given talent for pachinko, you know?"

"No, I don't."

And even if I did have such a talent, I certainly didn't want it. I mean, for a Rococo maiden like myself, having an aptitude for pachinko, of all things, would just be too, too unseemly. I have no strength, no stamina, I run really slow, and I can't even swim. I'm hopeless at sports or at anything physical. But I am quite happy with these failings of mine. After all, there's nothing charming at all about a Lolita who can run a full marathon and clock a pretty good time doing it, is there? If a Lolita is assaulted by a hulking thug and uses judo to throw him over her shoulder, that's just bad for her image. The weaker a girl is, the better. For a maiden, being frail and high-strung con-

fers status. Once in a while at morning assembly there will be a girl who faints from anemia, and every time I see that I gnash my teeth with envy. Exasperating though it may be for those around her, a girl is decidedly cuter if she cannot do a single thing for herself—if she doesn't even know how to tie her own shoelaces. I do not want to become the kind of woman who competently balances work and play, and is physically and emotionally robust, and is more suited to protecting than to being protected. I have no wish of becoming a woman of the world who has tasted both the sweet and the bitter things life has to offer. I don't ever want to eat anything bitter—I plan on living my life by filling myself up with only the sweet. And if that gives me cavities, I'll cry. If treatment is required, I'll ask to go under general anesthesia because I hate pain. Call me a sissy and laugh if you will, but this is how a girl ought to be. She should just avert her eyes from the harsh realities of life and, without ever lifting a finger, dreamily devote herself to fantasies that will never come true. If she believes that one day those fantasies will miraculously come to pass, that's all that matters.

"So hey, there's only one way to find out if you're a pachinko whiz or not. Come on, let's go."

"If I have to play a game, I'd rather do whist or croquet."

"You can't make money doing those. Don't you want some money, girl?"

"Well, yeah. I can't really mooch funds from my dad right now, and I don't want to get a part-time job, but I do want to buy some new clothes from Baby, the Stars Shine Bright."

"So win it at pachinko."

"Hmm..."

"Look, that Rococo lifestyle you're always talking about, that's, like, how lords and ladies live, right? And those guys never do any honest work, but just sit around having a good time and the money comes flowing in, right? So what's the

difference? Pachinko's gambling, but before that, it's a game. So, like, if you sit around playing this game and it wins you easy money, seems to me that's the Rococo lifestyle you want."

Hearing it put that way, I had to admit she had a point. It did not escape Ichigo that my resolution had wavered.

"That Win-Win place is a pain in the ass, so let's go somewhere else this time. There's this place called Pachinko Titanic over in Hiranuma, which I figure is close enough to get to even if you walk."

Ichigo, who had dropped by my house that day for no particular reason, drew a map for me on a memo pad so I could find my way to Pachinko Titanic, and then she quickly hopped on her bike and went ahead. "Why do we always have to do what *she* wants?" I muttered, and got ready to leave. On my way out, I passed Grandmother in the garden.

"I'm so glad you've found such a good friend, Momoko. I was worried, you know, about how you'd get along with the kids here in the countryside, since you've been a city girl all your life. You're lucky you've found a friend you have so much in common with."

"I have nothing in common with Ichigo, and she isn't even my friend, anyway."

"Really? But the two of you are always dressed the same way."

Hello?! Excuse me?! Can you possibly be serious?! What in god's name do you mean, Ichigo and I are dressed the same way?! I wondered if Grandmother was getting senile, and felt a bit worried for her.

"You both seem to enjoy looking very festive."

Oh. So that's what she meant. For an old lady like my grandmother, Ichigo's gaudy, tasteless Yanki clothing and my adorable, elegant Lolita clothing both looked simply theatrical, and were registered as being more or less the same.

"I'm just an old woman, but I've been watching that girl and she's different from a lot of the kids nowadays. She rides around on that funny motorbike of hers and pretends to be a troublemaker, but she's a good girl at heart. You just have to look at someone's eyes to see what kind of person they are. I haven't lived all these years for nothing, you know. Your father, on the other hand...he's my own son, bless him, but the boy's hopeless. It's true he's getting ready to start a new business, but I just know he's going to trip up and go back to being a good-for-nothing. The problem with him is, when he trips up, he doesn't know how to learn from that experience. Well, no point telling him that now, at his age. He's never going to learn. Everyone's born to fill a certain vessel, and that boy's is small and cracked. So you just follow your own path, without worrying about him. For his daughter, you've got a good vessel. It may not be all that big, but it's a beautiful one."

This grandmother of mine might look like a plain old country woman, but she was pretty sharp.

"I'd like to sit down and talk to you at length sometime, Grandmother."

"All an old woman like me's got to tell a young girl like you is a bunch of boring stories from way back when. That or how to plant rice paddies."

"I'd like to hear them, all the same."

"Well, when the time comes that you need to hear my stories, I'll tell you as many as you want. But right now I think your friend's waiting for you, Momoko. Go along and find her."

"All right."

Ichigo's pathetically slapdash excuse for a map in hand, I set out for Pachinko Titanic. I found it right away. But pardon me, who came up with this name? The Titanic *sank*, you idiots. Talk about bad luck. According to Ichigo, this establishment periodically changed its name, and its current name was taken

from the movie *Titanic* since it had been such a major blockbuster. Before that, it had been called Pachinko Tamagotchi. Okay, so I understand they're trying to be trendy, but by this time, the whole *Titanic* craze was so *over*. Still, considering the time lag between Ibaraki and urban areas, maybe "Titanic" counted as cool.

"I'll pick out your machine for ya."

"I'll do it myself."

"You don't know how to read the data."

"That's true. But you read the data last time, Ichigo, and you lost."

That's right. After blowing five thousand yen that day, Ichigo had said she'd be a chump if she gave up there and invested another three thousand, only to blow that too without hitting the jackpot even once.

"Me and that Win-Win place just had bad chemistry, that's all. This time, I'm gonna pick it right, just watch me. Hey check it out, they got 'Hanaman' here. This model's real easy to tell when it's gonna give you lucky breaks, plus it goes into triple-chance mode a lot. It's perfect for you."

"Ugh, no thanks. That weird Japanese-style design on it is ugly."

"You don't pick your machine cuz it's cute or ugly."

"Ooh, this one's cute! Hey, Ichigo, this one's really cute."

"Huh? What the hell's this model? I ain't never seen this one around before. Looks pretty old. Plus, see this? It's a cash machine *and* a limited. Forget it, this one's way too hard for you."

"What's a 'limited'?"

"Even if the numbers or the pictures line up, you won't hit the jackpot on it unless you get a ball into a particular hole inside a set amount of time. So with this type, it'll happen pretty often that one of them's programmed to give you a huge

bonanza, but I'm telling you, it's for real pros."

"But look, these little bears on it are really sweet."

"Hey, you listening to me or not?"

"Yeah, but it looks like I can just put five hundred yen in at a time. So let me play a thousand yen's worth, and if it's hard, I'll stop. Okay? Please?"

"This thing doesn't even have a goddamn data display. Plus, nobody's on this block. I'm telling you, there's no way you're gonna win crap on this thing. Oh, all right. Here, I'll check the pin angles for you."

"That's okay. I've already decided, I'm taking this one here."

"How come?"

"Just because. I feel like it's calling me."

"Whatever. But hey, just a thousand, you hear me?"

"Yes, Mommy."

The way she was treating me, I could've been a child taken to a game center by her parents. I took five hundred yen out of my purse, inserted it in the slot on the left side of the machine, and pushed the button to send the balls into the upper tray. I gripped the knob, and off I went! But the balls hardly went into the "chucker" and the graphics didn't move much. When I'd finally gotten them to rotate for a third time, three bears lined up, each of them wearing a red dress with a seven on it.

"Ichigo!"

"Huh?"

Ichigo was still in the process of selecting a machine, and was roaming around nearby.

"They've lined up."

She didn't seem to believe me, and took her time making her way over.

"Yeah, right. Holy shit, they're lined up! Okay, listen, turn the knob all the way to the right. Now get a ball into this hole,

right here. Just one ball will do it. But you gotta do it within the time limit, or you lose your chance."

I turned the knob to the right as far as it would go, and tried to get the balls into the hole Ichigo was indicating, on the upper-right side of the panel.

"You did it, girl! You fucking hit the jackpot!"

"Yay!"

That day, I filled six dollar boxes to the brim on that machine. Ichigo had gone with "Hanaman," and lost eight thousand yen.

"Guess you *are* a pachinko whiz."

"You think?"

After that, in spite of being a Rococo maiden, an angelic Lolita, I went out to play pachinko with Ichigo quite a lot. Ichigo would lose, and lose, and lose, and win a little, and lose, but I always won, no matter what machine I was on. I never filled less than five dollar boxes with balls. There was something almost supernatural about it, but certain machines just sucked me toward them, regardless of how hopeless Ichigo might claim they were. Sometimes it happened that the machine beckoning me was already taken. In such cases, I would always wait until it was free. Without exception, the person on it would quit within fifteen minutes and leave, or move to another machine. Then I would play on that machine and stack up dollar box after dollar box. Thanks to which, I was able to save up quite a lot of money.

"Hey, when you graduate? Play pachinko for a living."

"Yuck."

"You study up on all the different models and how to read the pins and stuff, I swear you're gonna be the number-one pachinko pro in Japan."

"I'd rather not. I mean, if I go to a boutique and want to be registered on their mailing list, I have to write down my name,

address, and occupation. I'd die if I had to write 'pachinko pro.'"

"So then you can just lie and write 'plasterer' or 'roofer' or something."

"If you're lying anyway, why do you come up with things like 'plasterer' and 'roofer,' instead of 'secretary' or 'waitress' or something normal like that?"

"Well, shit. Plasterers and roofers are way cooler, aren't they?"

Umm, are they? I don't think so. Ever since I had started hanging out with Ichigo, I was no longer sure about what was cool and what was uncool. In the Yanki world, being a plasterer or a roofer, that is to say, someone who works with their hands, is the number-one career target. Being a manual laborer or a cook, or for women, a hairstylist, was also acceptable. The point was to have a trade, a skill, as that was the proof of being a full-grown, respectable adult. That said, "working with your hands" did not include such professions as computer programming or graphic design, which were scorned as "brainwork." Only those who learned their skills through practice, under the tutelage of a master or experienced older workers, were recognized as having acquired a trade.

That day as well, I was playing pachinko with Ichigo at an establishment in Shimotsuma. The place was quite empty, and she and I were sitting next to each other at 'Sea Story' machines. I was steadily filling dollar boxes, but while Ichigo had hit the jackpot once, it proved to be a one-time occurrence and she was forced to use the balls in her dollar box in the hope of getting lucky again.

"Hey, who've we got here?"

The voice sounded familiar, and when I looked up, I saw it was the guy with the slicked-back hair who'd helped us out at Parlor Win-Win. As before, he was wearing a T-shirt with

his blue satin baseball jacket draped over his shoulders. Below that came tight-fitting black leather pants. So far so good, but when I glanced down at his feet I almost fell off my chair. He had on white patent leather shoes with pointy toes, if you can believe it. And for some reason, no socks. Why, why, why did he pair slim-fitting leather pants with shiny patent leather shoes? While it's none of my business, this kind of thing makes me very sad. It makes me want to cry. Not to mention, where in this day and age had he even found such passé shoes? The style was practically antiquated. Putting that aside and returning to the action, the guy stuck his face between me and Ichigo and first addressed me.

"See you're on a roll again today, little miss. Pretty amazing how you manage to fill those dollar boxes up the way you play."

Then he turned and glanced at Ichigo's machine, flicked his eyes at Ichigo's face for a second, and then turned back to her machine.

"This little miss ain't having a lucky day."

"Shut the fuck up. I'm about to go into triple-chance, all right?"

"No you aren't."

"I hit the jackpot once, all right? I just turn this shit another four hundred or six hundred times, it's gonna happen."

"Maybe. But before it happens you'll run out of balls, the way you're playing."

"I checked out the pins, pops. And I'm blasting them in right over there."

"That's where you're messing up. You read the pins on this machine all wrong, little miss. They look like they're angled normal, so theoretically what you're doing might be right, but if you want to rotate those graphics, you gotta aim for this area over here."

"That's bullshit."

"Try it and you'll see if it's bullshit."

The guy placed his left hand over Ichigo's right hand, which was gripping the knob, and tried to make her change its position. The moment he did that, though, Ichigo threw his hand off with tremendous force, stood up and shouted, "D...d...don't you fucking touch me!" Her voice was shrill and had none of its usual bravado. I saw that her face was flushed a bright red, and that her body was shaking a little. She seemed to be in a slight state of panic. When it passed, she sat back down as if nothing had happened, and perhaps to cover her embarrassment, lit a cigarette.

"Don't go around touching people without asking, you fucking perv."

"My apologies for touching your hand, all right? But 'fucking perv' is way out of line, little miss. I was just being nice and trying to show you where to hit the balls."

The guy then gripped the knob on Ichigo's machine and turned it.

"You aim for this spot over here, see?"

"You send 'em over there, they just go down the drain."

"Watch real close. Sure, most of the balls go down the drain, like you say. But count 'em, little miss. See how one out of every ten balls drops straight down the middle and into the chucker? The way *you* were playing, little miss, your chances of getting the balls into the chucker were all over the place. Sometimes a bunch would go in, a lot of times they wouldn't. So if you look at the big picture, you were getting maybe one out of thirty balls in there. Ain't no way you can win at pachinko with just a half-ass knowledge of the game. One balls costs four yen. You lose ten balls, you lose forty yen. Do your math, and play so you lose as little as possible."

"You a pachinko pro, pops?"

"Nah—Here, little miss, this is your machine. Play the way I told you, and pretty soon you'll probably go into triple-chance mode. But after that's over, change machines. Ain't nothing else gonna come out of this one."

Just as Mr. Slick had said, Ichigo's machine went into triple-chance after a while and she hit two jackpots. She did as she'd been told and signaled that she was done, so I decided to quit at the same time. I had six dollar boxes behind me. Mr. Slick leaned against the wall and watched us.

"Hey, pops. Could we maybe go to a coffeeshop or someplace and you can tell us more about how to play? I'll pay."

"My advice costs a lot more'n a cup of coffee, little miss."

"I'll give you everything I won today, how's that?"

He chuckled.

"Keep it. But I ain't got nothing better to do, so I'll take the cup of coffee. Gotta say, this is quite an honor. You two are the talk of the town."

"Talk of the town?"

"Thing about Shimotsuma, see, is it covers a lot of territory but there ain't a whole lotta people here, so it's like a small town. And the pachinko aficionados of Shimotsuma ain't talking about nothing else these days but a little blonde Yanki gal and her itty-bitty sidekick who's dressed all funny, and how they show up in pachinko parlors all over town and take home wads of cash. How the one who wins is always the sidekick, and how she ain't lost even one single time. How it's almost as if she was working some kind of con, the way she'll pile up the dollar boxes on machines that ain't spit out a ball in history."

"We're legendary," Ichigo said happily.

"That's right. You two are living legends, little misses."

Parlor employees had stacked our dollar boxes onto two separate carts, and were heading toward the counting machine. Mr. Slick peeled his back off the wall and started after them.

"Hey, pops. Where'd you get that jacket?"

"What, you want one like it? Design on the back's pretty sharp, ain't it? I got it on Ame-yoko, way back."

The back of the satin baseball jacket had Fujin, the God of Wind, embroidered on it. But Fujin, who usually is depicted on a cloud, was riding a tiger on this jacket. I know that Fujin and Raijin, the God of Thunder, are considered to be cool among Yanki because they're so strong-looking. I also know that tigers and dragons are popular for the same reason. But that was no reason for Fujin to get off of his cloud and bestride a tiger, was it? The reasoning, I suppose, was that if you took something strong and paired it with something else that's strong, you'd get something *really* strong, but Fujin playing rodeo on a tiger simply looked silly. And excuse me, but was the God of Wind so small he could ride a tiger in the first place? As I gazed appalled at this silly Fujin, Ichigo quietly whispered to me.

"I know someone else who's got this same embroidery of Fujin on a tiger, but it's on a kamikaze coat instead of a baseball jacket, and it's on the front, not the back. Remember I told you about Akimi-san? Her. Isn't that really trippy? First I was saved by someone with this design on her kamikaze coat, and now I'm being helped out by a guy with the same design on his jacket. Like, maybe Fujin riding a tiger is my guardian god or something. I think I might get it painted on my bike somewhere."

Please do not add anything more to that wildly, rampantly flamboyant scooter of yours, I beseech you. Please relinquish this too, too foolhardy idea.

There was no coffeeshop near the pachinko parlor, so we got into Mr. Slick's car and went to the closest family restaurant. I ordered iced tea, Mr. Slick asked for a coffee, and Ichigo—perhaps hoping to make Mr. Slick think she was tough—ordered a beer.

"You sure know a lot about pachinko, pops."

"Quit calling me 'pops,' okay? I'm only twenty-five."

"Any dude over twenty's an old man, pops."

"Well, maybe for someone your age, little miss."

"I ain't a little miss, I'm Ichiko. So just call me by my name from now on, will you?"

"Her name is Ichigo, actually."

When I said that, Ichigo hit me really hard with her fist. Barbarian.

"This here's Momoko."

"I prefer being called 'little miss,' myself."

"So how come you know so much about pachinko, pops, if you aren't a pro?"

"Anybody can figure out how to win at pachinko if they use their head. Long as you listen to what people say, or read those pachinko magazines, you ain't gonna win jack."

"Well, I think of pachinko as a mind game between you and the management."

"You got that right. The question is how good you can read their minds, little miss. I can't swear on this, but myself, I don't believe anything those data displays say. Cuz I figure the management can make them say whatever they want. The pins only get adjusted once a day, but it's the ROMs that control how many balls get spit out and how many jackpots a machine's gonna give you, and I don't see why they couldn't change the programming on the ROMs as many times as they want, depending on how many customers they got in there, or what time of day it is, or anything else. Remember how they searched you at Win-Win that day? I think the machine this little miss was on was either programmed so it could never be a mega-winner, or they changed the settings on the ROM while she was playing. And that's why they were so sure she'd been using something, because the way they had it programmed, there was

no way in hell she could win."

"How come she always wins, when she's totally clueless?"

"I don't know the answer to that one, but I can tell you that every pachinko place in town has an eye out for you two. And I know they're making damn sure they program the machine this little miss is on so she won't ever hit the jackpot. But she does anyway."

Mr. Slick downed his cup of black coffee.

"Let me first ask you this. You two ain't running any kind of con, are you?"

We shook our heads.

"So the only explanation I can come up with is, this little miss herself is making the ROM go haywire. Now ordinarily, the only way you can mess with the ROM and make it spew out balls is you use an illegal device that's designed to do that. But if my theory is correct, this little miss has got some kind of electromagnetic energy field that screws with the ROM. You know how they say everybody releases some kind of *ki*? Some people call it an aura. Well, call it what you want, but basically it's a form of electromagnetic energy. Still following me? I see the little blonde miss is a little confused. Pay attention in class sometimes instead of just shooting spitballs, all right? Anyway, my take on this is that, for whatever reason, this funny-dressing little miss radiates some kind of electromagnetic energy that makes the ROM go screwy. She's like a human magnet. So it doesn't matter what machine she's on, the ROM's gonna go out of whack. Upshot is, technology's still got a long ways to go before it catches up with human potential."

"So how do I get to be like her?"

"Sorry to say, but you can't."

"So what the hell are you, anyway, pops?"

"Oh, I'm just a low-level racketeer."

"So you're a yakuza."

"Well, if someone calls me a yakuza I ain't gonna deny it, but for myself, I chose this life cuz I wanted to be a racketeer. Which is, an immoral bum who tries to be of a little service to others by taking on dirty work that respectable folks can't or don't want to do. At least that's my own personal definition."

"I shouldn't have called you a yakuza, then. I'm sorry."

Ichigo's apology was immediate and genuine. She is a good girl (let's give her a pat on the head).

"Hey, that's fine. Yakuza, hoodlum, it all boils down to the same thing—I'm just a bum. So hey, little misses, you plan on keeping up the pachinko?"

"So long as Momoko's into it, yeah, I guess."

"Well, you two've been really high-profile, the way you've been piling up the boxes over such a short time. So even if you aren't using anything dicey, every place in town's got you on their blacklist. I'd say, you wanna keep on playing, you do it outside Shimotsuma or you change your M.O. Instead of busting the bank every time, you quit at a point the management can live with. Real pros, see, change parlors all the time, and they make sure they never win too much. If the management can't tell you're a pro, that's what makes you a real pro. Well anyway. Us meeting today like this was probably some kind of sign, so here—anytime a tightfisted sonofabitch gives you a hard time, like the dude at Win-Win, just give me a call."

Mr. Slick wrote his cell phone number down on the back of a matchbox that was by the ashtray on the table, and handed the box to Ichigo.

As she had promised, Ichigo paid the bill at the restaurant. When Mr. Slick said, "I ain't letting a kid treat me," she shoved him aside, saying, "We had an agreement," and settled the check. He gave us a ride back to the parking lot of the pachinko parlor where we'd met, as Ichigo's scooter was there, and then we watched him drive off.

"Dude's got a low-rider '97 Lexus with a UCF 30-series face-lift. Comes on all VIP but in a low-key kinda way. Trying to be Mr. Cool."

"Hey, Ichigo? You're afraid of men, aren't you?"

"As if. Gimme a fucking break."

"Then why did you freak out like that when he touched your hand?"

"...I'm only telling you this cuz it's you, okay? See, when I'm fighting a dude, I can grab him by the balls or whatever, no big deal. But like, other times? If a guy touches my hair, or even shakes my hand or something, it makes me fucking nervous. Like, totally uptight, you know? It makes me break out in a sweat and stuff."

"That's what you call 'androphobia,' which is a fear of men. You've never had a boyfriend, have you, Ichigo."

"No way. Dudes these days're fucking wusses, man. I wouldn't date 'em if you paid me."

"So you've never kissed a guy, either."

Ichigo blushed a deep red.

"No. Anything wrong with that? I'm strictly hard-core, all right? So what about you, you ever kiss anybody?"

"Of course I have."

It amused me to lie to her.

"Oh. You have? So, like, I heard it tastes sweet. Does it?"

What kind of question is that? You just start middle school, kiddo?

"I was lying. I would never do anything so yucky."

"I didn't think so. I just knew it."

Ichigo was quite plainly relieved.

"But you, Miss Ichigo-who's-never-been-kissed, have just fallen in love, haven't you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"No use trying to hide it from me."

"Me? In love with who?"

"That Mr. Slick who just dropped us off."

"You're dead."

She suddenly threw her leg out, probably as an unconscious reflex to the embarrassment of my hitting the nail on the head. Then, having kicked me in the buttocks as hard as she could, she crouched down in front of me as I hunched over with pain, and apologized profusely.

"I'm sorry, girl. What can I do, you throw out this weird-ass crap all of a sudden. I mean, shit, why would I get the hots for an old dude like that?"

"The whole time you were talking to him, Ichigo, you had all these stars twinkling in your eyes. I guess you wouldn't notice that yourself."

"That's bullshit."

"Plus, even though you didn't use very nice language, your voice was higher than usual."

"Gimme a fucking break. He ain't my type, okay?"

"Oh, really? In that case, will you give me that box of matches?"

When I said that, Ichigo's face took on a very solemn expression, and she shook her head.

"Can't do that."

"Please?"

"I said, I can't do that."

"He gave it to both of us, you know. I can hold on to it."

"No, you can't. If someone hands you a pack of matches, you can never give it to anyone else, ever. Not to your mom or dad, or best friend, or anybody. That's what my grandpa told me, right before he died."

"What happens if you do?"

"It sets off a curse."

By this point, Ichigo's brain was working overtime and close

to shorting out. She probably had no idea what she was saying.

"A curse?"

"Yeah. The Ushiku Buddha comes to life and tramples the towns of Ibaraki, shooting fire from his mouth."

The Ushiku Buddha was a colossal statue of the Buddha that suddenly towered out of nowhere, for no reason, in the country town of Ushiku, Ibaraki. At 120 meters, it was apparently the tallest Buddha in the world and was vigorously trying to make itself a local tourist attraction and sightseeing spot on the basis of being registered in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, but the people of Ibaraki didn't seem to be promoting it very actively to residents of other prefectures. Its main selling point was that the Great Buddha of Nara could fit on the palm of its hand, but let's face it, it was an *arriviste*, a Buddha-come-lately built only in 1993. It hadn't done much for anybody yet.

"Well, if the Ushiku Buddha's going to run amok, that's pretty serious."

"Yeah. Make terrorism look like peanuts. We're talking about saving whole towns from getting flattened."

They say love makes people foolish, but Ichigo was foolish to begin with, so the foolishness of Ichigo in love was boundless: an infinite hell of idiocy. Still, well, here in front of me was a late-blooming flower bud, slowly starting to open its petals. Ah, how bittersweet. How tickly. But also, how lovely. Even while gazing fondly upon Ichigo, awkward in her first inkling of love, I couldn't help hatching a horrifying number of evil little schemes, one after the other, such as telling the newly awakened Ichigo that men adore frilly dresses, and dolling her up in a Lolita outfit. Or placing a giant scarlet ribbon on her head, claiming that's all she needs to have Mr. Slick at her feet. (Ooh, I am so terribly, terribly naughty…Tee hee.)

Ever since starting pachinko I had been spending all my weekends at pachinko parlors, so I had forgotten to visit Baby, the Stars Shine Bright for a long time. Checking their website, I found lots and lots of items I wanted to own: a parasol with torchon lace, a tartan jumper, a vanity bag with Baby's symbol at the opening, et cetera, et cetera. I had enough wealth to acquire every single thing I wanted—my purse was stuffed with money earned through blood, sweat, and tears (liar). When I told Ichigo I was making a rare visit to Daikanyama that weekend, she said she would join me to search for the legendary Emma. Whenever I had filled a particularly large number of dollar boxes, I lent Ichigo some cash. She had been setting this aside to pay for the embroidery on her kamikaze coat and not spent a penny of it, so she must have had at least a hundred thousand yen.

We had arranged to meet at Shimotsuma station at ten o'clock in the morning (even starting off that early, we would only reach Daikanyama around Baby's opening time of one o'clock). I got there slightly ahead of time, wearing my white blouse that has a rounded, lace-edged collar as well as a lace-edged necktie with Baby's symbol in the middle of it, and another blouse over the shoulders, this one pink and schoolgirlish with a small Baby symbol over the left breast, while the skirt I had on was a particular favorite I've worn so many times I've lost count, which is pink and other than having some white lace is rather plain in front, but then has pleats on the sides, and when you get to the back, it has six rows of frills—in other words it's simply bursting with Baby, the Stars Shine Bright flourishes and is a radiant example of a for-Lolitas, by-Lolitas Lolita skirt. Oh, and on my head I had on a white bonnet covered with lots of torchon lace, which makes you look like a baby when you wear it. I have a sad tale to relate regarding this bonnet, and since I have some time until Ichigo shows up, I think I shall, if you don't mind.

Filled with joyous anticipation at making my first visit to Baby in such a long while, I spent quite a lot of time in happy anguish trying to decide what to wear, and finally arrived at the outfit just described, baby bonnet included. So far so good, but when I took the bonnet out of my closet, goodness gracious! I had quite a shock: several places around its rim had not-so-small holes in them. As I stood there aghast with the holed bonnet in my hands, Grandmother came into the room, peered over my shoulder, and said, "Looks to me like some mice had a little feast." Although my precious clothes were on hangers, and thus safe, the bonnet had been lying on the floor of the closet and become mouse food. What was I to do? I considered wearing one of my headdresses instead, but rejected the idea right away. The bonnet was essential to the outfit I had coordinated for this occasion—my heart was set on it. On the other hand, I couldn't wear the bonnet like that, either. After giving it some thought, I decided to embroider the rim to camouflage the holes. First, I rolled the edges of the holes and put in running stitches all around them in white thread to make it look like the holes were there on purpose. Then I used chain stitches and satin stitches to embroider all sorts of flowers on the intact material between the holes, and ended up with quite a lovely bonnet, the effect so professional, if I do say so myself, as to make one think it had been sold with such embellishments on it in the first place.

Until this, embroidery for me had been nothing more than a hobby, so while I had embroidered handkerchiefs, coasters, and luncheon mats, I had never used any of these things. To make something embroidered had never been my purpose, which was to enjoy the activity of embroidery for itself, so the resulting items had no worth whatsoever for me. This was the first time I realized that I could use embroidery to make something I could actually wear. —Oh, Ichigo has just arrived at the station on her noisy scooter, so let me return to the narrative. But excuse

me, please wait a minute. I'd expected Ichigo to dress to the nines for her inaugural visit to Daikanyama, it's true, but what on earth is this she's wearing? I'm sorry, but when she shows up looking like this, I cannot return to the story at hand.

Ichigo had a purple kamikaze coat, so long it was practically dragging on the ground, draped over her shoulders. On its right arm was an armband with the Rising Sun on it, and on its left arm was an armband that said "U.S. ARMY" (so which side was she on? If this was World War II, she'd be killed by both), and her bottoms were, if my eyes weren't playing tricks on me, knickerbockers of the type that roofers and construction workers wear (perhaps they were big on her, for the waist was cinched with a white patent leather belt). These knickerbockers, too, were purple. And, oh dear, you shall never believe what she had on for a top: a *sarashi*. That's right, she had yards of white cotton wrapped around her chest. On her left hand, instead of rings she was wearing clunky chrome knuckles, while around her neck dangled a pendant she had bought from me, which was a large gold tag with "VERSACE" carved across its top. As for her feet, they were bare and stuck into a pair of leather-soled *zori*. Her eyeshadow was an even brighter shade of blue than usual, and her lipstick also seemed to be more vividly red than ever. A pair of cheapie-looking gradient-tinted sunglasses rested halfway down her nose, held in place with her left ring finger. As she strode toward me, she threw her right arm up in greeting.

"Shit, girl, you look even dumber than usual."

Allow me to return those words verbatim to your good self.

Ichigo asked me if I'd already bought my ticket, and when I said I had, she nodded, stalked past the ticket vending machines, and shouted at the window next to the turnstiles.

"Hey, how much to Daikanyama?"

The station attendant seemed to be explaining to Ichigo how to buy a ticket.

"Uh-huh, so change at Toride and go out to Ueno. Switch to the Yamanote line. Shibuya? I said Daikanyama."

I pulled Ichigo's sleeve.

"You can only buy a ticket up to Shibuya from here. You need to take the Toyoko line from there to Daikanyama."

"Yeah, so? How come you can buy a ticket that covers the Joso and Yamanote lines, but not the Toyoko line? They're all JR."

It seemed Ichigo was not aware that train lines other than those belonging to Japan Rail existed—that there were other railway companies in this country as well.

"Let me just buy your ticket for you."

"Hey, thanks. The guy here doesn't know how to explain shit."

I was pretty sure the station attendant's explanation had been perfectly clear. The problem lay with Ichigo's powers of understanding.

Ticket in hand, Ichigo said, "All right, Momoko! *Deppatsu* time!"

"It's read *shuppatsu*, not *deppatsu*."

"Bet you think I didn't know that, huh? Thought I had it all wrong, didn't you? Well, this time it's no cigar, girl. See, bikers always say *deppatsu* instead of *shuppatsu*, on purpose. Remember that, cuz everyone knows it. I mean, shit, ain't you ever read *Bukkomi no Taku*?"

No, I have not. I do not read boys' manga. And no matter how many people said it, it wasn't "*deppatsu* time," anyway. The train would not even be arriving for another fifteen minutes at least.

"Fucking hell, we gotta wait around here for fifteen minutes?"

I seated myself on a bench. Ichigo sat down beside me for a

moment, but maybe she was keyed up about her first visit to Daikanyama, for she jumped up right away, lit a cigarette, and started wandering around the station, going over to the kiosk and peering out at the platform and so on.

"Hey, Ichigo?"

"What."

"Those trousers you're wearing, are they real knickerbockers?"

"Yup. Pretty cool, huh? They're Tora-ichi's extra-extra-longs. The necklace I'm wearing's one of your fakes, but these are the real thing. Certified genuine article. These aren't just any old knickerbockers, they're Tora-ichi."

"But you work in a bike shop, not a construction site. So why are you wearing knickerbockers?"

"Cuz they got style, what else?"

"Knickerbockers are stylish?"

"Hell, yeah. They're *totally* fucking stylish. 'Specially these extra-extra-longs I'm wearing, which're, like, the coolest things around right now. You know how normal knickers only poof out to like, around your knees, and then they're tight? Well, these are designed to be poofed out all the way down to your ankles. Cuz what you want is a lot of volume. So if you buy a pair that's, like, a size too big for you, you look really tough."

"Where do they sell them? At Jusco?"

"As if they'd sell these at Jusco, you dope."

But you said they have everything at Jusco...

"You know that spaghetti place called Brussel Sprout on Route 294? Well, right near it's this store called Workman that specializes in work clothes, and they got just about everything Tora-ichi makes. I swear, Workman fucking rules. They even mark down Tora-ichi stuff a little. We could totally walk there from here. You want, we could take one train later and go get you a pair of knickerbockers right now."

"No thank you."

"They got vests and other stuff, too. Like *tabi* boots. You own even one thing of Tora-ichi's, it gives you some class."

It appeared that Tora-ichi, while not a Yanki fashion brand, had a special status among Yanki. Maybe it was something like what Vivienne Westwood means to Lolitas.

"Ichigo? Is what you're wearing today your number-one killer outfit?"

"Yup. This is what I always wear for gang meetings and other important stuff."

"Do you wrap the *sarashi* straight onto your bare skin?"

"Well, yeah. You can't get psyched if you got something on under it."

"Doesn't it ever come loose?"

"You wind it real tight to make sure it doesn't."

"Isn't that uncomfortable?"

"Duh. Of course it's uncomfortable."

If I thought about it as a Japanese-style corset, I could understand its meaning, more or less. Whenever I really want to get into the Rococo spirit and give everything I have to being a Lolita, I force myself into a tight corset and make my waist smaller. So might a Yanki's *sarashi* and a Lolita's corset have the same purpose? Ugh, what an awful thought. But if you look at Yanki bikes and clothes, you can see their aesthetic is all about extravagant addition, which is actually the same as the Lolita aesthetic...*Sigh.* What am I saying?! No. No! Yanki and Lolitas? Never the twain shall meet. They're as different as India and Indonesia, supermarket and Superman, Alice in Wonderland and Shinji Tanimura's old folk band, Alice. Right?

"If I find Emma and I ain't dressed to kill, he ain't gonna think I'm serious."

"So that's the kamikaze coat you want him to embroider?"

"Yeah, right here in front."

"Well, I suppose there isn't any space left on the back."

"The back of a kamikaze coat is reserved for team stuff. Cuz a biker's back is his billboard, see? But anywhere else, you get to put whatever you want. So, like, Akimi-san has Fujin riding a tiger on the front of hers."

"You don't have anything embroidered on the front of yours, yet."

"Well, I got some on my pockets."

Her kamikaze coat had two large breast pockets, one on either side. The right pocket was embroidered with the words "killer fighter," and the left with "*hannya shingyo*," in gold thread. She had once mentioned that embroidery never came out quite the way she'd pictured it, and when I saw her pockets I understood the reason for her dissatisfaction. Although the kanji were embroidered to have a lot of visual impact, each character was slightly off-kilter. Kanji are combinations of various parts. If the angle or spacing at the places where these parts come together is not just right, the character doesn't gel and ends up looking strangely dull. Like if you use only straight lines to write a kanji that has a lot of strokes, people will be able to read it, but it'll be somewhat lifeless. This was exactly the problem with the kanji on Ichigo's kamikaze coat. But still, putting that aside—I could understand "killer fighter," but why "*hannya shingyo*"?

"Oh, this one? Well, first, I decided to put in 'killer fighter,' right? But having stuff on just one pocket would look dumb, so I needed something else with four kanji to put on this side, for balance. Like, something really awesome. So I wanted to go with '*hannya*,' cuz that's a female demon, right? But it's only two characters. So I looked it up in the dictionary and found '*hannya shingyo*,' which is four and looks totally tough and hard-core. I ain't sure what it means, though."

If you found it in the dictionary, dear, how about glancing at the definition at the same time? I don't dispute that the kanji for

hannya shingyo *are rather fearsome-looking, but it's the name of a Buddhist sutra, all right? You put that on your kamikaze coat, people will just think you're really pious.*

"Ever since I put this in, I have old ladies I don't even know come up to me sometimes and start praying. Guess I look pretty awesome."

Wrong. They're assuming you're on a pilgrimage or something.

"Still, I shouldn't have gotten this stuff done on the pockets. Cuz now I can't put anything inside 'em."

In other words, the embroidery was not done only on the pocket itself, but went through it to the material underneath. They had simply stuck the whole section under the sewing machine, and the resulting effect was that the embroidery had sewn the pocket closed. I was quite taken aback at the crude, or should I say slapdash, method they had used.

"Let me see what you have on the back, Ichigo."

"Sure. Get ready to be amazed."

The back of Ichigo's kamikaze coat had, across the top, seven kanji in silver thread that read, "Shimotsuma's strongest biker gang." Under it, again going across, were the five kanji reading "Ponytails," this time in large gold lettering. Under that came small red kanji that said "Strictly hard-core fighter goddesses." And then, after a small space, there was a line of five huge kanji going straight down the middle of the back, in gold thread.

"Um, Ichigo? You know the vertical line of kanji, the one with the biggest letters? How do you read it?"

"Huh? You're the one who's always giving me such a hard time about not knowing stuff, stupid. Shit, even a middle schooler could read that."

"Well, I think I understand what it says, more or less, but..."

"You read it *go-iken-muyo*—which means, we don't listen to nobody. Nobody's opinion counts for shit, as far's we're concerned. Okay?"

"So that *is* what it's supposed to say…In which case, you've got one of the kanji wrong."

Yes, indeed. The last of the huge, flamboyant characters was incorrect.

"It's really hard for me to tell you this, but the *muyo* in *go-iken-muyo* is written with the characters for 'no' and 'use.' That's why it means 'I have no use for your opinion.' But you have the last character wrong, and while it *is* possible to read it *muyo*, the common reading would be *buzama*. And, well, actually, *buzama* means 'shabby.'"

What had been meant to say "we don't listen to nobody" had, due to the bungled last character in the phrase, come out as a strange way to say "shabby opinion."

"You're…shittin' me."

"Um, no."

"Holy fuck. Every one of us on the whole team's got this on our backs."

And not even one of you noticed? The Ponytails are truly unbelievable.

"We're riding around town looking tough as hell, with this writing on our backs saying we're Shimotsuma's strongest gang, and under that it says 'shabby opinion'? That fucking sucks."

Indeed, it is very, very idiotic.

"We're the laughingstocks of Ibaraki, man."

You certainly are.

"This is fucking embarrassing."

I couldn't put it better.

"If you hadn't fucking noticed, we wouldn't even know."

I don't think that is the issue, actually…

The train arrived, so I took the crestfallen Ichigo by the hand and dragged her inside. The sight of Ichigo decked out in full hard-core Yanki attire sitting next to me in my head-to-heels Lolita ensemble must have been bizarre in the extreme, for the

two of us were instantly the center of attention. Nobody in our car had any qualms about staring with undisguised curiosity. When people think something is slightly strange, they will surreptitiously flick glances at it. But when they run into something that is far beyond the pale of what they consider normal, they can't help observing it intently, without thinking whether it might be rude. Well, of course. If you saw a man dressed in tights and a leotard walking down the street, you'd probably be unable to resist snatching a couple peeks at him. But if you saw someone in a Doraemon costume walking down the street, you'd probably stare straight at him, even though you knew there was someone inside. The combination of an ultra-Yanki with an ultra-Lolita was probably close to surreal. Although I was aware of our fellow passengers' notice from the start, Ichigo was still reeling from the shock of "shabby opinion," or maybe she was simply unobservant, for she didn't seem to notice that we were openly being stared at like freakshow exhibits. It was only after we had changed to an Ueno-bound express at Toride that Ichigo turned to me and said, "Hey, don't it seem like people're looking at us?"

"Yes."

"Like, *staring*. Like, boring *holes* into us."

"If their stares were laser beams, we'd be disintegrated by now."

"They're all looking at *you*, cuz you're wearing those weird frilly-ass clothes of yours. Thanks a lot, you dope. I'm getting embarrassed just sittin' next to you."

"It's true they *are* looking at me, but they're looking just as much at you, Ichigo, with equal fascination."

"Yeah, right. I'm totally fucking normal."

"Oh, no you're not. You're totally customized."

"Like, how?"

"In every way. Normal high school girls do not wear

kamikaze coats. They do not wear *sarashi*. Or workmen's knickerbockers. Or leather-soled *zori*. And, they do not wear chrome knuckle rings."

"Huh. Well, if they were eyeballing us like they wanted to pick a fight, I'd make 'em sorry they even thought it. But that ain't really what it's like."

Just as Ichigo said that, a small child maybe about five years old came running over to us. He pointed a finger at Ichigo and shouted back at his mother, who sat far away.

"Mommy! What's the name of this monster?"

The mother hurried over to us, bowed her head to Ichigo and apologized. Ichigo glared at her for a second, but seemed to regain her composure when the child then pointed at me and asked, "And what about this monster?"

"This monster's called Loligon, kiddo. It comes from Planet Frilly-ass."

Upon hearing this, the child stared up at me and shrieked, "Loligon! Loligon!"

That fucking pissed me off (Oh dear, what a vulgar expression. Allow me to rephrase that. That intercourse urinated me off...Umm, that doesn't make any sense, darn.), so I pointed at Ichigo.

"And this monster is called Yangilus. It comes from Zokkian, and it shoots fire out of its nose when it gets mad."

"Yangilus?"

"Yes, Yangilus."

"Fire comes out of its nose?"

"Yes, because it's a scary monster."

"I wanna see! I wanna see!"

The child clamped itself onto Ichigo's knickerbockers and pitched a fit. Ichigo gave me the hairy eyeball, but I pretended not to notice. She started it, after all, by calling me "Loligon." So there. But not even Ichigo—nay, because this was Ichigo,

she could not bonk an innocent little child on the head with her chrome knuckles. If it were me, little child or not—or rather, for the very reason that it was a child and I'd definitely be stronger—I would have stomped on his foot as hard as I could when his mother wasn't looking. As it was, Ichigo ended up having the brat clutching her knickerbockers all the way to Ueno station.

By the time we reached Daikanyama it was a little after one o'clock, so we beelined to Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. I briskly picked out the parasol, jumper, vanity bag, blouses, skirts, bloomers, and all the other things I'd wanted, and brought them to the cash register.

"Oh my, you're making a lot of purchases today, Miss Ryugasaki."

"I was saving up the money while I wasn't coming."

"Thank you so much. It'll take me some time to wrap everything up for you, so please take a seat on the sofa while you wait. I'll let you know when it's ready."

It was very soon after they had opened, so Ichigo and I were the only customers (well, Ichigo wasn't a customer, to be precise).

"What? Can we really sit on this sofa?"

"Oh, yes. Please do."

Feeling somewhat like a celebrity, I softly lowered myself onto the red sofa.

"Don't you want to sit down too, Ichigo?"

"Uh, no thanks, I'm, uh, fine."

Ichigo seemed to be slightly abashed at finding herself so out of her element. The moment we'd entered, she'd gone quiet like a cat brought to a foreign home. After all, in this shop the "frilly-ass" clothes Ichigo always mocked were absolutely normal, and I blended in effortlessly. Until a few minutes ago we were both weirdos, but once inside Baby's boutique, the

only misfit was Ichigo.

"That bonnet you're wearing, Miss Ryugasaki. That's one of ours, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Did you do the embroidery on it yourself?"

I answered the shop attendant's question rather nervously.

"Yes. Um, I hadn't worn it for a while, and when I took it out today I found some holes around the rim, like it had been moth-eaten...But I wanted to wear it no matter what, so I tried to fix it up with some embroidery. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. I just couldn't believe how beautifully it was done. It's really, really cute."

Just then a thin, pleasant-looking man dressed casually in jeans and a cotton indigo shirt entered the shop, carrying a lot of large paper bags. He swiftly handed the bags to the attendant at the cash register and pressed her to check their contents. When she asked him if these were what had been ordered the day before, he nodded. I watched idly as she looked inside the bags, assuming the man was delivering items from the garment factory used by Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. When she was done, she turned to him.

"Take a look at that bonnet she's wearing. Isn't that adorable? It's one of ours, which she fixed up with embroidery because it got some holes in it."

The man fixed his eyes on my head, or rather, on my bonnet, and slowly inched closer until he was standing right over me. Androgynous though he was, he was a person of the male gender and it distressed me to have him so near. I tensed up.

"It's rude to stand so close to a customer, boss."

"Oh, sorry. The work just looks so professional, I couldn't help myself..."

Boss? Of what? The garment factory? No, wait, don't tell me this is...

"This is fabulous work. You've done *such* a beautiful job on this bonnet! I'd love to have this kind of embroidery on our products, but there isn't a factory anywhere that's capable of anything this fine and intricate. And even if there was, it would cost too much for us to sell as merchandise. So thank you for doing this."

"This is Miss Ryugasaki, boss. You know, she was one of our best online customers when she lived in Kansai."

"Oh, Miss Ryugasaki, of course. Well, how nice to meet you. Hey, don't we still have a lot of those novelty-item chokers we made? Do we have both the black and the white? If we do, I'd like to give Miss Ryugasaki both."

There is no way the boss of the garment factory would say this... which would mean, oh my goodness, don't tell me this is the president and chief designer of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, my lord Aki...Aki...Aki...Akinori...Iso...be...?

"We still have both, boss."

The man took the chokers, one black and one white, and placed them on the table in front of me. They were made of lace ribbon, with Baby, the Stars Shine Bright's symbol inside a heart in the middle.

"If you like these, please accept them with my compliments. Just a small token of my gratitude."

I screwed up all my courage and asked, "Um, er, would you, um, might be, er, the, um, Mr. Isobe?"

I have to admit, my language was a mess.

"Yes, I am."

"That is, er, the Mr. Akinori Isobe who is, um, the represententive director of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright?"

"Yes, that's me."

It was really him...! My idol, Akinori Isobe of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, the man who had turned my life topsy-turvy, was standing right in front of me! And I was talking to him! My

knees suddenly started shaking so hard they were knocking against each other. How, how, how did I get to meet this celestial being? Was I using up my entire life's worth of luck in this single moment? The second I left the shop, would I be run over by a car and die? Maybe I wouldn't even mind. *Good-bye, Loser. Good-bye, mother of mine, remarried to that gynecologist you ran off with. Good-bye, Grandmother in Shimotsuma. And good-bye, Ichigo, who for some reason I seem to be stuck with all the time. Please forgive me for leaving you all behind—but don't worry, I died happy, because I was blessed with the good fortune of meeting Sir Akinori Isobe of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright in my final moments on earth.*

While I was lost in addlepated reverie, Sir Isobe gazed once more upon my bonnet, said, "I'm off, then. I hope we meet again, Miss Ryugasaki," and left the store.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long. I finally have everything wrapped up for you. And the total for that will be..."

I made the payment still half in a daze, received the shopping bags containing the items I'd purchased, and tottered out of the shop. Once outside on Hachiman Avenue, my legs crumpled beneath me and I landed in a heap on the pavement.

"Hey, you okay?"

I heard Ichigo's voice from somewhere.

"So who the hell was that, anyway? You've been all wigged out ever since he showed up. He do something to you? Cuz if he did, I'll find out where he lives and beat the shit outta him for you."

"Please don't talk about Sir Isobe like that. Without the brand that he started—Baby, the Stars Shine Bright—the person you know as me wouldn't even exist. I just met God, Ichigo."

"What, that dude was God?"

"Yes. So please don't call Sir Isobe 'dude,' all right? If you

ever call him that again, I will kill you."

"He's the boss, right? Usually, anybody who gets to the top of any kinda organization gives off this feeling like they got their hands dirty. That dude didn't, though."

"He's not a dude!"

"Uh, yeah. Sir Isobe...right?"

"Right. Come on, Ichigo. Let's go find Emma."

"But you said you weren't gonna help me. You said you'd bring me to Daikanyama, but I'd have to find it myself."

"I changed my mind. I'll go with you."

I was so happy I'd gotten to meet Sir Isobe and talk to him, that I was like a dog seeing the first snow of winter—I just wanted to race around like a maniac. I couldn't just get on the train and go home to Shimotsuma, but neither could I feign nonchalance and go shopping. I hate athletics and have no aptitude for it. I consider exercise a crime. But on this one occasion, I had an irrepressible urge to burst into movement. If Daikanyama had really been a hill, that day I would have dashed to the summit and hammered about five flags into the ground.

"You're sure that it's in Daikanyama, right? Daikanyama's a pretty small district, so if we just walk down every single street, we'll probably find it."

"Cool."

"If the place actually exists, that is."

We started walking around at random. We went up and down Hachiman Avenue, turned into side streets and back again, went out towards Kyu-Yamate Avenue, and then returned, carrying out our house-to-house search in silence. I have no idea how many hours we tromped around looking for Emma, never once stopping at a cafe or even buying a can of soda from a vending machine. The one who cried uncle first was Ichigo.

"Come on girl, let's take a break."

"But we don't have much time."

"Don't you ever get tired?"

That day, I was adrenaline on legs. There was so much adrenaline coursing through my body that if I'd been given a drug test, I would have been banned from the world of competitive sports for life. We were on an alley off of Komazawa Avenue that headed to the station, and Ichigo slumped against a telephone booth and slid down to the ground.

"You're such a wimp."

"No, I'm not. You're just too high-energy today. I mean, shit, you're practically atomized."

"I think you mean 'atomic.' Oh, I know!"

I had just realized that we'd forgotten about the most basic step to take when looking for a place of business. I grabbed Ichigo's feet and dragged her forward so she was no longer blocking the entrance to the phone booth, then entered the booth and opened the directory with yellow pages. I found "embroidery" in the index, turned to the pages listing embroidery-related shops and businesses, and carefully read through every single one. I found an "Emma" in Sarugaku-cho, Shibuya. Sarugaku-cho was within the Daikanyama district, so this had to be it. I tried calling the phone number—but while I heard the ring tone, nobody answered. Still, the fact that the phone rang meant the place existed. Even if this turned out to be the day of the week they were closed, it actually existed.

"Ichigo, I found it."

Ichigo, who had been lying flat on the road like a dead person, shot to her feet like a zombie.

"For real?"

"I'd completely forgotten to look for it in the phone book. I searched for it on the Internet, but never thought to check the yellow pages—so stupid of me! I tried calling the number now to make sure it exists, and if it does to ask for directions,

but nobody answered. But still, the phone rang, so it means the place does exist. The address only says Sarugaku-cho 25, but if we know that much, we should be able to find it. Let's go back to the station and look at the map on the board there."

"You fucking rock, Momoko! It's weird, though, cuz I called Information and they said they had nothing registered for a place called Emma."

"How did you ask?"

"I said an embroidery place called Emma, in Daikanyama. So then the operator asked if that would be Daikanyama-cho, and I said yes, and then she said there was no Emma in Daikanyama. She said there was a place called Emma in Saru-something, but that ain't the place I want, so..."

"Gosh, Ichigo! Why didn't you tell me that in the first place? You see, Daikanyama-cho itself is really small, but generally when people say Daikanyama, that includes Sarugaku-cho and Ebisu-nishi."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. I mean, *saru* means monkey, so I guess it figures you'd have a monkey on a hill."

The way you understand things is all wrong... Oh, fine. I shall stop fulminating against the stupidity of this half-wit Yanki lass. This girl is not so much stupid as mentally challenged. She needs to be shown compassion.

We went out to the station and checked where the 25 block of Sarugaku-cho was on the map, then headed down Hachiman Avenue toward Shibuya and turned into a side street by the post office. If we searched this area carefully, we would be able to find it. Thinking it might be an ordinary house, we checked the nameplate of every single structure we passed.

"Hey, Momoko, I think it might be that house over there."

"It just looks like somebody's house."

"Yeah, but next to the name, there's a small sign that says 'Emma.'"

"Hmm…Well, maybe. But…"

"It's gotta be the place."

Ichigo ran to the house and pushed the button on the intercom by the gate. After a little while, a woman's voice answered.

"Uh, I'd like to talk to you with respect, about embroidery. I've come all the way from Shimotsuma in Ibaraki, and my name is Ichiko Shirayuri. If I could just have a moment of your valuable time, please."

What are you, a traveling salesman? And lying about your name again, calling yourself "Ichiko" when it's Ichigo.

There was silence at the other end of the intercom, but finally the voice said, softly, "Please come in." Ichigo and I entered the gate, knocked on the door, and then opened it and stepped inside.

Greeting us inside the entrance was a thin, unassuming woman of around fifty wearing a white long-sleeved apron. She seemed to be a perfectly plain, ordinary housewife. Looking somewhat perplexed, she said, "Well, step inside" and gestured with her right hand, which was clad in a glove that had its fingertips cut off. She led us into the living room.

"So you've come all the way from Shimotsuma," she said, pouring us some cold barley tea.

"Yes. I'd like to have some embroidery done, if I may."

"You'd like some embroidery done on that kamikaze coat you're wearing…is that it?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible."

"I know the master refuses most people who come, but this is a really special case and I came all this way. So please just let me talk to your husband, at least."

"My husband is a salaryman, and doesn't know anything about embroidery."

"Then who's the master?"

"I suppose that would be me."

"Huh?"

"I do embroidery. But I do not make a business of embroidering things on people's clothing. All I do is teach people how to do embroidery."

Hmm...Well, maybe. But...is what I had said before Ichigo had pressed the intercom button. The reason for my doubt was that, while the sign did say "Emma," after that came the words "Embroidery and Handicraft School."

"I give classes in embroidery and other handicrafts here at home, as a hobby. Most of my students are ladies living in the Shibuya area, though there are a few young girls like yourself."

"So the legendary embroidery artist..."

"Is not here. Once in a while, I have people like yourself—is it all right to say Bosozoku?—come to the door, asking for embroidery to be done. There apparently was a place called Emma in Nishi-Nippori until about fifteen years ago. That's the one you're looking for, with the legendary artist. From what I've heard, he was a rather difficult person, but a master who did very fine work and took on a lot of embroidery jobs from Bosozoku people. But he passed away, from old age, and his shop isn't there anymore. It seems he didn't have any children or apprentices to take over the business. I started teaching embroidery classes just about fifteen years ago, and since the name of my school is 'Emma,' I suppose someone leapt to the conclusion that the other Emma moved from Nishi-Nippori to Daikanyama. Well, you know how rumors take on a life of their own. It's still all right when people like yourself come here wanting embroidery, but once in a while I have yakuza people showing up thinking there's a legendary tattoo artist here. I don't even know where to begin explaining to them...I suppose I could save myself a lot of trouble by just getting rid of the

name 'Emma,' but my father came up with this name before he died, so I'd rather not change it for sentimental reasons."

Ichigo had not touched the barley tea she'd been offered, and was listening to the embroidery teacher's story with the expression of someone who is struggling to accept facts they cannot, but must, acknowledge.

"I'm very sorry. After all the trouble you went to, searching me out."

At these words of the embroidery teacher's, Ichigo sprang to her feet and bowed.

"No, *I'm* sorry for barging in on you like this. It was my misunderstanding, and I apologize."

It was already dark when we got outside. Ichigo and I walked in silence down Hachiman Avenue to Daikanyama station. We rode to Shibuya, from there to Ueno, and made our way home to Shimotsuma via Toride. With her shoulders sagging, Ichigo did not look the least bit like the monster Yangilus from Zokkian, even though she still had on her kamikaze coat. Just as the train was pulling into Shimotsuma station, she finally opened her mouth.

"Sorry you had to go around with me all day for nothing. I'm a fucking moron, aren't I?"

"I didn't mind. I know it was a huge shock for you to find out it was all a big misunderstanding, especially since you thought you'd finally found the place after looking for it all day. I was really afraid you'd take your frustration out on that embroidery teacher and go berserk, but you held it in and even apologized to her. You were really cool, Ichigo."

"Yeah, well I wanted to go berserk, believe me. But then I'd *really* be a fucking moron. When things're tough, you gotta act tough. You gotta be cool. That's what being hard-core is all about."

The train came to a stop at Shimotsuma station, and we got

off and went out through the turnstiles.

"Hey, Ichigo?"

"Yeah."

"How many days until the send-off parade?"

"It's next Saturday night, so about a week."

"How about if you let me do that embroidery you wanted?"

"You?"

"I might not be able to make it as cool and sharp-looking as you imagine it, because I don't really understand Yanki tastes. And my embroidery skills might not be anywhere close to those of that legendary master at Emma. But one thing I know for sure is that it'll be a hundred times prettier and better done than the embroidery you've got on your kamikaze coat right now. I'll look at *Champ Road* and other places to study up on biker styles and designs, I promise. So how about it? Would you be into letting me do the send-off parade embroidery for you?"

Ichigo stared down at the ground, deep in thought, but then she raised her head, wordlessly removed her kamikaze coat, and handed it to me.

"It's okay?"

"Take it. Put 'Thank you, Akimi-san' on it in gold for me."

"How big do you want the letters? And in what style?"

"Look, when a biker gives you their kamikaze coat, it's like they're putting their life in your hands, all right? You hand your life over to someone, you don't start nitpicking about what they do with it. Just go ahead and do it however you want."

Ichigo jumped on the outlandish scooter she'd parked in front of the station, started the engine, and turned the handle with the brakes on, filling the air with a deafening roar. Then, after sounding her horn at full volume, she hit the clutch and sped off into the darkness, disappearing from view in a matter of minutes. But wait, without her kamikaze coat, all she was wearing on top was the *sarashi*. True, it was almost summer,

but it was night and sure to be chilly if you were on a bike. She would definitely catch a cold. "Almost transparent fool," I whispered, clutching the kamikaze coat she'd entrusted to me.

A Mincho font, I decided, would suit a kamikaze coat better than a Gothic font—but even so, there were all kinds of Mincho fonts to choose from. I needed something bold and striking, but considering the message being embroidered, I felt that making it look too menacing wouldn't be good either. I pulled out some Nobarasha books and started researching typography.

The publishing house Nobarasha (it actually exists, you know—don't think I just made it up because this is a novel) primarily puts out copybooks of illustrations, designs, motifs, and lettering that can be used to make New Year cards and posters and such, the contents of which are very charming. If you go to the art and design section of a bookstore you'll find all kinds of decorative design catalogs, but most of them are rather trendy and boring, with either very cutesy or very realistic illustrations. Nobarasha's collections, however, are different. All of their designs and illustrations completely ignore the fact that this is the 21st century. These are pictures that would definitely look better printed on pulp than ordinary paper. They would be perfect on worksheets that second-grade teachers write out by hand, mimeograph, and distribute in class, or on garage sale posters drawn up by ordinary folks with no artistic talent or sensibility and stuck on utility poles around the neighborhood. In other words, the drawings and decorative lettering in Nobarasha's books are so out-of-date as to have become timeless. Although most bookstores no longer carry

them, once in a while I do stumble across one while browsing. And if I do not already own the book thus encountered, I simply have to buy it, regardless of whether most of the drawings in it are contained in another book I already have. The first book of Nobarasha's that I obtained was their *Designs & Motifs* which, if you look at the imprint, you will see was first published in 1949. Under that, it says "Fifth edition, fourth printing, 1994." In other words, this copybook was compiled fifty-three years ago. Back then, the designs and motifs contained in it were probably very modern. But they just kept on reissuing it over and over, so that what was printed eight years ago were still the same drawings from 1949. Ordinarily, someone would say, "These designs are old-fashioned. Let's put out a totally revised edition." After all, this is not an encyclopedia of art, but a copybook for practical use. I do not know whether they are deliberately using designs from half a century ago out of conviction, or simply reprinting the same book without thinking about it at all (I think it's the latter. I want it to be the latter, because that would be funnier), but either way, I simply adore Nobarasha's books and have turned to them countless times for inspiration in choosing embroidery designs.

After scrutinizing the typography samples at the back of *Designs & Motifs*, I decided to use a decorative Mincho font that was slightly fluid, like brush calligraphy, yet sharp and modern-looking, with a touch of warmth. I had studied brush calligraphy through middle school, so while it took me a lot of time to write "Thank you, Akimi-san" in the style I had selected, it was not all that difficult. When I finally had it just right, I held it up against the front of Ichigo's kamikaze coat to decide how large and close together the letters should be, and then I cut the paper so each letter was separate and went to a convenience store to make enlarged copies on their copy machine. I copied each letter in a variety of sizes, returned

home and lined them up on the kamikaze coat to figure out what was the best balance. Once that was decided, I could get started on the actual work.

I placed tracing paper over the letters I had decided to use, and traced their outlines with a pencil. Then I took out the kamikaze coat, placed transfer paper on the parts I would embroider, set the pieces of tracing paper with the letters over that, and pinned them to the coat so they would stay in place. Next I used a tracer to go over the outlines I had traced, and they were transferred onto the coat. Once I had transferred all of the letters in this way, I took a large embroidery hoop and set the inner ring around the part where the first letter would go, pulled the material taut, and tightened the outer ring in place. Of course I did not forget to stretch a cut-open plastic bag over the material at the same time. Now all I had to do was start stitching.

To give the letter a three-dimensional quality, I first put in horizontal running stitches as an underlay, then went over them vertically with long and short stitches. This is a technique where you alternate long and short stitches, and although it's laborious, this way I could use two slightly different shades of gold thread to give the letter depth and shading. Even though the letters were in a decorative style, each one was so large that if I used only one color of thread, they would come out looking flat. For every block I worked on, I would first tear open the plastic to expose only that part of the fabric. When I was done with that block, I would cover it again. If you don't do this, you might rub the parts you've already embroidered and make them fuzzy, or get them dirty, while you're sewing the next block. For the thread I could have used standard six-strand floss, but I wanted to highlight the minuteness and fastidiousness of the work, so I chose to use single-strand floss instead. I put the letters in so that, facing the coat, "Thank you" would

be on the left side and "Akimi-san" would be on the right. It bothered me that the letters themselves were uninteresting and not the least bit cute, but I had awakened to the pleasure of doing embroidery for a purpose. To stitch something for somebody—something they wanted—and to think that the embroidered garment would actually be worn, filled me with a strange feeling of exhilaration I had never experienced when simply embroidering useless items for amusement. I stitched away tirelessly and meticulously like a robot, without need of food or sleep. Once in a while I got thirsty, though, so I took occasional swigs of tea from a plastic bottle.

I had started my preparations for the project on Monday afternoon. When I was finished, having worked continuously without food or rest, it was early Wednesday morning. It was only when I was done that I realized I had completely forgotten to go to school on Tuesday. Oh my, I'd been absent without notice. What had my guardians, the Loser and Grandmother, been doing while I sat absorbed over an embroidery hoop instead of going to school? Weren't they supposed to ask me if I didn't have school that day? Well anyway, I was done with the embroidery, but I wasn't quite finished yet. I still had some final touches to complete, for without these, my work would lack durability. I got out the ironing board and iron, filled the spray bottle with water, turned the kamikaze coat inside out, and set it on the board so the embroidery faced down. I misted it with some water and then started ironing it to stretch out the material where it had puckered from the stitches. If you don't do this, pulling the fabric left and right while ironing over it, the embroidered sections will not harmonize with the surrounding material. Once I had smoothed out the fabric properly in this way, I ironed over the embroidered parts once again, this time starting in the center and moving the iron out to the edges, to give the embroidery a plump softness. This last

quality is determined by the heat of the iron and how strong you press down, so you have to make constant small adjustments while vigilantly checking the condition of the thread and material. When I had finished this painstaking process, I was really, truly done.

I brought out a hanger, hung the kamikaze coat on it, and viewed my handiwork. Um, may I sing my own praises? Because, well, gosh, I am amazing! I am a genius! I have never seen such beautiful embroidery anywhere! This is a divine creation! I am the goddess, the Kuan Yin, the Parvati, the Athena, the Oracle of embroidery! *O Oracle, O Oracle, who is the greatest embroidery artist in the entire world?* Hey, syllables are working their way out of my mouth: Mo-mo-ko-ryu-ga-sa-ki. Omigod, it's me! Kyaaaa!

As I was carrying on deliriously in this fashion, I was suddenly overcome by drowsiness and a dreadful feeling of exhaustion. I keeled over onto the floor and fell into a deep, deep sleep.

When I woke up, I was in a corner of the room where I had been working, tucked into a futon that hadn't been there before. For some time after awakening, I didn't quite understand what had happened to me. Looking around the room I saw the kamikaze coat hanging by the window, and then I heard Grandmother's voice saying, "Ah, so you're finally awake?"

"Did you put this futon out for me, Grandmother?"

"I poked my head in here yesterday morning and saw you lying flat on the floor. It scared the daylights out of me, I can tell you. I thought you were dead. But then I heard you snoring and realized you had finished that embroidery you'd been working so hard on, and fallen fast asleep. So I brought out the futon, dragged you over to it, and managed to get you covered up. It wasn't easy for these old bones, believe me. I'm afraid I was a little rough on you, but you were sleeping like a baby. I could do anything to you, and you wouldn't wake up. It got so funny,

I even doodled on your face with a magic marker to see if that might do it, but you never opened your eyes." She chuckled. "Go to the bathroom and take a look at yourself."

I groggily got to my feet and staggered to the bathroom. When I looked in the mirror, I saw spirals drawn onto both of my cheeks, a mustache under my nose, and a beard on my chin. What on earth did Grandmother think she was doing? I mean, generally speaking, do women well into their sixties play pranks like this on their granddaughters? I washed my face and returned to the room. A bowl of rice gruel was waiting for me.

"That was funny, wasn't it?"

"Yeah."

I started eating the gruel Grandmother had prepared for me.

"What time is it now, Grandmother?"

"Eight o'clock at night."

"So I've been asleep for about twelve hours?"

"It wasn't this morning that you went to sleep, it was yesterday morning."

"Huh?"

"So you were asleep for a day and a half."

"A whole day and a half?"

"Well, they say a sleeping child is a growing child. So you're probably a good five centimeters taller than you were yesterday."

"Yuck. I want to stay small."

I called Ichigo on the phone and told her the embroidery was finished. She said she would be right over, and about thirty minutes later the obnoxious rumbling of her engine announced her arrival. Grandmother ushered her into the room I had been using as my workshop, and the moment she laid eyes on her kamikaze coat, she let out a bellow.

"Wow, is this it?!"

Then she was speechless for a while.

"You really did this yourself?"

"Yup."

"Holy fuck. I ain't never seen anything like it. It's awesome! It's really beautiful. I didn't even know embroidery could *be* this beautiful."

I had assumed that Ichigo's vocabulary was restricted to words such as "cool," "classy," "snazzy," "swank," and "sharp," but she had looked at the embroidery and called it "beautiful." She had used this word as praise. I almost started crying.

"Man, I'm so stupid I don't even know how to thank you. Now I owe you another huge favor. Shit, Momoko, I just keep owing you more stuff all the time. Is it, like, really okay for me to wear this?"

"It's your kamikaze coat, Ichigo."

"So it's okay? I'm gonna try it on. I really am."

"Try it on."

"Once I put it on, I ain't never giving it back."

"I don't want it."

Ichigo slipped her arms through the sleeves. As if on cue, Grandmother thoughtfully brought in a full-length mirror. Ichigo gazed at herself in her newly embroidered kamikaze coat with its shiny gold letters down the front, stuck her hands in the hip pockets and happily struck a variety of poses.

"Man, you compare this to what I got on the back, I hate to say it but it makes the stuff on the back look like shit. Hoo-boy, check this out. 'Thank you, Akimi-san'—hm? What the fuck is this?"

"Oh, that's a little bonus."

"Who asked you to stick crap like this on here?!"

After I had finished embroidering "Thank you" on the left side and "Akimi-san" on the right side, I was still extremely pumped up and that probably had something to do with it, but my essential Lolita nature asserted itself, or should I say,

erupted forth. Below the "Akimi-san" I had embroidered a small strawberry in red and green thread. Well, gosh, it really needed to have something cute on there.

"You fucking bitch! Just when you got it all totally cool-looking, what'd you have to put this cutsie-ass strawberry on there for?"

"See, you just admitted it's cute. What's wrong with cute? And having a strawberry mark on it lets everyone know right away that this is Ichigo's kamikaze coat."

"Look, a kamikaze coat ain't supposed to be *cute*. This is fucking embarrassing is what it is. Who ever heard of a biker with a goddamn strawberry on their kamikaze coat?"

"That's why I restrained myself and made it really small. I was actually dying to put in a whole bunch of larger strawberries and cherries and things, you know."

"Man, you are such a fucking Lolita."

"Through and through."

In spite of her objections, Ichigo seemed to like the kamikaze coat very much. The next day, she showed up at my house with it on over her school uniform, even though she didn't have a gang meeting or any other reason to wear it.

"I just, like, wanted to show this off to everybody, but I can't let Akimi-san or anyone else on the team see it before the parade, so I wore it to school."

"The parade's tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah. You know where Route 294 crosses the one-two-five? Well, that's on our route, so you can come out and watch us. That's pretty close from here."

"What's 'one-two-three'?"

"Not 'three,' you dope, 'five.' People around here call Route 125 the 'one-two-five' in English like that. You don't know that, everyone's gonna laugh at you for being a hayseed."

If knowing that is proof of being a Shimotsuma citizen, then those

who know it are the hayseeds, I believe…

"What time does the parade start?"

"We'll start getting together around eight, so it'll probably be around nine when we take off."

"And you'll ride around until morning?"

"Nah, we don't go all night. Maybe till eleven or so. Well, tomorrow's a pretty special parade, so we might keep going till midnight."

"And what do you do when it's over?"

"Go home."

"And?"

"Bathe, eat, go to sleep."

"I thought Bosozoku usually ride around, well, if not all night, until at least three in the morning or so. Don't they?"

"You go around raising hell till that late at night, you're a fucking nuisance. Keeps the whole town awake. Plus, you stay out all night, your parents're gonna get worried."

Excuse me, but I thought you were a bad-ass biker chick? If you start riding at nine and quit at eleven, then just go home and go to bed, that sounds pretty straight-edge to me. There's nothing delinquent about it. Indeed, I would call that exceedingly wholesome and well-behaved.

"I mean, like, there's some wanna-be Zokki dickheads who ride around past midnight, don't give a shit about all the noise they're making, but like, a lotta the people around here are farmers. They get up fucking early. You don't think about them, you're just an asshole. Plus anyway, it gets past midnight, you get tired, right?"

No, I do not, actually. You turn into a sleepyhead after midnight, Ichigo? What are you…a baby?

The next night, sometime after ten o'clock, the stillness in which only the gribbitty-gribbit of frogsong could be heard was disrupted, for just a moment to be sure, by the earsplitting

ruckus of engines and horns. Ichigo must have been riding past, wearing her kamikaze coat with the embroidery I had stitched onto it. And when I thought about how the backs of all seven riders in this so-called "parade" were bedecked with the large, imposing characters spelling out "shabby opinion," my face broke out in a smile.

The day after the send-off parade, that is to say on Sunday, Ichigo telephoned me around three in the afternoon. She was nearby, along Kokai River, and could I come out to meet her? I went out to Route 125 and walked in the direction of Tsuchiura for a short while, until I came to the river. Its bank was a grassy park where poppies (I wonder why poppies, of all flowers) bloomed in profusion throughout the spring, but the season was already heading toward summer and there were almost no people out enjoying the flowers (obviously, since no flowers were blooming anymore, and the ones that were left were starting to wither, giving off an odor that filled the area with a faint but strange stench). I spotted Ichigo and went to meet her. I assumed she wanted to tell me all about the previous night, and I was right. She had parked her bike on the road edging the narrow riverside park, and was puffing on a cigarette while she waited for me.

"If you were this close to my house, you could have just come over. Or met me at the Forest of the Nobility."

"It's kinda nice to sit by the river once in a while. Y'know, be outside looking at the sky and the dead poppies and shit."

Ichigo had her kamikaze coat slung over a white Galfy tracksuit.

"So how was the parade?"

"It was fucking awesome. Everyone showed up with totally far-out custom work on their bikes and shit, which they got done especially for yesterday, right? It was so intense, like, everybody was totally into it, before we even took off. But I

swear, this writing you put in for me was like, the best. It fucking ruled. Man, everyone was all over it. They were all asking me where I got it done and stuff, so finally I told them a friend of mine did it. So now all of them want you to do stuff for them, too. You wanna be a professional biker-embroidery artist? You'd make a shitload of money."

"No, thank you. I only did yours because it was yours. I would never, ever embroider anything on anyone else's kamikaze coat. Ugh."

"Well, that's what I figured, so I told 'em I'd twisted your arm cuz of the parade, and you only agreed to do it if I swore it was a one-shot deal. I said you'd never do it again, no matter who was asking, including myself."

"So what did Akimi-san say?"

"She was fucking stoked. She just stared at it for a while, like real quiet, and then she said, 'That kid I found crying by the road's turned into one fine woman' and hugged me, real tight. It was too much, man. So then Akimi-san gave a short speech and then she held up the team flag and we took, like, a gazillion pictures of all of us like a bunch of idiots, and then it was like, *deppatsu*, man. We went up the one-two-five out to Route 204, turned down 56 to get to 294, and from there we headed out to the 24, and then we rode down Route 20 back to the one-two-five, which is the part where I always get this total headrush, like, by the time we turn onto 294 again, my mind's a fucking blank. I'm like, flying, you know? I don't even know what's what anymore. And then we stopped where 294 hits the 24, you know, under the Ishige Highway."

She may have been flying in her mind, but Ichigo's scooter cannot go faster than thirty kilometers an hour. How, bless her, did she manage to get a headrush at that speed?

"And then, at the very end, we sent up a whole bunch of fireworks and wished Akimi-san a happy marriage and stuff..."

Ichigo abruptly broke off at this point, and lit another cigarette.

"Akimi-san thanked us and said how much this meant to her and stuff, and then this dude stepped out from the shadows and put his arm around her and said something corny like, 'Glad I got to see your last ride, baby.'... Yeah, that's the guy she's getting married to. So she introduced him to everybody. She told us the Fujin riding a tiger she has on the front of her kamikaze coat's borrowed from the picture he's got on the back of his baseball jacket. She said, when she rode around with that picture on her it felt like he was with her, so she could pull crazy stunts and stuff and never feel scared. So she was gonna stay with him for the rest of her life. She goes, 'I know it was kinda sudden that I told you guys about graduating, and I'm sorry about that, but this was the fucking best send-off parade anybody ever got.' And then she told us that, actually, what happened was, she got knocked up and had a baby growing inside her. And when she said that, everyone started cheering like crazy..."

So Akimi-san was Mr. Slick's girlfriend. And Ichigo had met these two people with pictures of Fujin riding a tiger separately, in different situations, and been drawn to them both, albeit in different ways...It was one of those mysterious tricks of fate.

"Well, there's no way I could win against Akimi-san. And no way in hell I could ever double-cross her, anyway."

You should *double-cross her. Loyalty, friendship, obligation—these things mean nothing in the face of love. If you want something, take it—who cares if it belongs to somebody else? If you love something, do anything it takes to get it, dirty tricks included. Break the rules. All is fair in love and war. Forbearance is a maiden's worst enemy. If* you're *happy, that's all that counts.* —Is what I would usually say in such a situation, but I knew better than to say it to Ichigo. It didn't matter that Mr. Slick had stolen her heart, or that her feelings for him were so strong she could hardly con-

trol them—she would never tell a soul about her first love but keep it locked inside herself. And even if Mr. Slick turned out to be a philanderer, and realized Ichigo had a crush on him, and made a pass at her, she would probably punch him in the nose. She would take a perfectly good opportunity and deliberately throw it down the toilet. That was our Ichigo.

"Hey, Momoko. Women should never cry in front of anybody, right?"

"Right. But there's nobody around right now."

Large teardrops started falling from Ichigo's eyes. Some of them hit the cigarette stub she had in her mouth and extinguished it. Ichigo stayed standing, with her fists clenched, as her tears continued to flow. She kept her jaws clamped tight together to keep from sobbing, but the tide of emotion battered her defenses mercilessly. Pretty soon she squatted down and started bawling like a beast, her nose running freely and spit dribbling out of her mouth. I quietly watched over her, telling myself that Ichigo was fighting herself right now. If I spoke some words of comfort it might make her feel a little better, but emotional anguish should not be relieved with platitudes the way physical pain is blunted with drugs. Because when people discover an easy way to alleviate emotional pain, I think they lose something very important.

When Ichigo had sobbed and wept and cried her heart out, I silently handed her a handkerchief. She wiped her eyes with it, and then blew her nose for good measure. *Hey, don't go blowing your nose into someone else's hankie*...But just this once, I decided to make a special exception and close my eyes to this breach of etiquette.

"Hey Momoko, you know how that dude always called me 'little miss'? Guess for a guy his age, I'm still just a kid. I ain't even a 'young lady' yet."

"Maybe."

"Wish I was grown up. Man, when and how am I ever gonna be a real grown-up?"

"After you've gone through a lot of pain, and a lot of grief, and laughed a lot, and lost a lot, and felt a lot of anger, and a lot of sorrow, and cried a whole lot."

"Well, I cried a whole shitload right now, so you think maybe I'm a little more grown-up now?"

"Yeah, I think you are. A little bit, anyway."

Really—this isn't a compliment or wishful thinking or anything like that—it seemed to me that Ichigo looked a little prettier than before, and a little more grown-up, as she lit another cigarette and blew the smoke out of her mouth. But if I told her that she'd let it go to her head, so I gently tucked this impression away inside myself.

One day, a while after the send-off parade and Ichigo's tears, I checked my e-mail on my computer and found something titled "Pardon this sudden request." The sender was Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. I opened the mail with great haste.

Dear Miss Momoko Ryugasaki,

I was very happy to make your acquaintance the other day.

The reason I am sending you this e-mail is that I urgently require your assistance. I realize this is a very rude thing of me to ask of a customer, but if it

would be all right with you, please call me at the number below. Thank you.

Akinori Isobe
Baby, the Stars Shine Bright

An e-mail written personally by Sir Akinori Isobe sent straight to your, no, *my* computer! Respond right away, and get this expensive titanium necklace absolutely free—supply is limited, so hurry! I tried calling the number he had given me.

"Um, my name is Momoko Ryugasaki. I received an e-mail from Mr. Isobe."

"Please wait a moment," said the female voice on the other end, and then almost immediately afterward, Sir Isobe came on the line.

"I'm so sorry, sending you that e-mail out of the blue."

"Oh no no, not at all the least."

"The thing is, I urgently, that is to say, absolutely, need your help with something."

"Excuse me?"

"Where should I start? Ummm, well, okay, let me first just tell you what I need. I'd like you to do some embroidery on a jumper for me."

"Huh?"

"You see, we're starting work on our new Fall/Winter line right now. So, well let me explain the process to you a little. First, we start out by sketching the designs. And then we use those sketches to create patterns. When the patterns are ready, we take them with the fabric we've selected to the garment factory, and the factory makes one sample of each design. We check the samples they make, and if they're fine, we put in production orders for them. So that's the process, but the thing is,

a lot of times the samples *aren't* fine. We give them detailed, easy-to-understand instructions along with the patterns, and half the time what comes back is like, how on earth did it end up like *this*? This is *nothing* like what we asked you to make! Well, you know how our clothes have a *lot* of lace, for example, and our designs are just so different from anything they've ever seen before, so the people at the factory seem to be using a lot of trial and error. But even so, the things they bring us sometimes! You just would not *believe* some of those samples. One time they actually sent us something with the sleeves sewn on back-to-front, *and* upside down...I mean, how could they not notice that when they're sewing it on?! We are talking about incredible, unthinkable mistakes! Oh god, don't get me started...So anyway, for this Fall/ Winter collection, we had them make us a jumper that has lots of double lace trim, with ribbons lacing up the bodice and lots of rose lace all over the skirt, in various sizes and colors, sort of like an appliqué effect. The base color is off-white and rather simple, but that's offset by the multicolored rose lace accents."

"That sounds really cute."

"Oh, it's *darling*. But the thing is, when they sent us the sample, there was no rose lace! None! Not a single rose! And we'd sent them the pattern with precise instructions as to where to put the roses and everything. I mean, these roses are absolutely crucial! Without them it's just a boring white jumper, for god's sake. So we asked them to redo the sample immediately, of course, but they say it's going to take them two whole weeks. Well, ordinarily I could live with that, but the thing is, I want to use this sample for a magazine ad and that means we need it in the studio in a week or so at the latest. We can't ask the magazine to extend the deadline for submitting our page layout, so I considered using a different design from our Fall/Winter collection—but as far as I'm concerned, this

jumper with the rose lace appliqué *is* our Fall line! This is the image I want for Fall! Was I ready to compromise on that? No! I just couldn't do it. So then I decided to sew the rose lace onto the sample myself, but just as I sat down to do it, I remembered the embroidery on your bonnet. And I just knew that if I showed you the design sketch and had *you* do the embroidery, Miss Ryugasaki, the jumper would turn out exactly the way I picture it, or even better."

"And that's why you sent me that e-mail…"

"Yes. I had some reservations about asking a customer to do something like this for me, and I do realize this is a tremendous imposition, but when I thought about how exquisite, and tasteful, and skillfully done your needlework was, I just couldn't restrain myself."

"I'm very happy that you thought of me. And honored that you asked me to do this. But I don't think I can do it. I mean, you're planning to use this jumper in an advertisement. What if it doesn't turn out the way you imagine it?"

"I'm *positive* it will. I've been in this business for a long time, and I can tell the exact quality of the stitching on a garment, or the quality of a fabric, with my eyes closed. You may not believe you can do it, but I *know* for a fact that with your skills, Miss Ryugasaki, you will create an absolutely *adorable* jumper."

"Thank you."

"So you'll do it?!"

"I most humbly accept your kind request."

Oh my goodness gracious! We agreed that the very next day, I would pay a visit to Baby, the Stars Shine Bright—not to their boutique in Daikanyama, but to their offices in Ebisu. School, naturally, would have to go ahead without me.

Their offices occupied one suite in a building. A lot of dresses swathed in plastic, no doubt the samples for their Fall/Winter line, were hanging on racks. Beyond them were people work-

ing at computers. I had expected that since this was the headquarters of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, its interior decoration would be even more Rococo than the boutique, with everyone dancing waltzes while going about their work most elegantly, and instead of the standard box-shaped computers they'd have specially built curvilinear machines in the Art Nouveau style, while their writing implements would not be ballpoint pens and pencils and such, but the classical, noble feather—but it was a very simple, or should I say plain, orderly office. Needless to say, there was not a single person dancing the waltz.

Sir Isobe brought out two design sketches and laid them out on a table. One of them was a black-and-white line sketch, and the other was the same thing but colored in. The moment I saw it I found myself shrieking, "This is adorable!"

"This is the sketch that our designer came up with. And yes, it's simply adorable. You see the lace has quite a lot of volume in this sketch, but I reduced the amount of lace to tone that down a little when we produced the pattern, because I wanted to draw out the rose lace accents." He turned and shouted, "Hey, bring me that sample that was missing the rose lace. And a dummy."

A woman with a chignon who was dressed in Baby, the Stars Shine Bright brought over the white jumper and a tailor's dummy. She dressed the dummy in the jumper, then bowed her head and left.

"See? This is where it was supposed to have lots and lots of rose lace in red and white and yellow and all sorts of colors, like in the sketch. Ugh, my god, just look at this! Without them, this is nothing but a pretty cute negligee! It just isn't *it* without the roses."

"So here, near the front hem, it was supposed to have a sequence of striking yet refined roses in a variety of colors."

"Right, and since this is for fall we want a little volume to create a sense of warmth."

"In that case, one option would be to use ribbon embroidery."

"Ribbon embroidery?"

"That's where you use silk ribbon instead of thread. You can form roses with it, which would have a lot more volume than ordinary rose lace."

"Hmm, I see."

"Or you can use a featherstitch to embroider lacy roses that sort of overlap with the lace on the hem, which might give an interesting sense of volume too."

"Aha, right."

"Or if you want a slightly more rustic look, meaning if you want the warmth to be expressed in a countryish style, you could use fancy yarn or mohair for the thread."

To my own astonishment, when I looked at the original sketch and compared it to the unfinished jumper in front of me, ideas came rolling through my head one after another like in a phantasmagoria (well, that sounds like my brain's a haunted mansion or something) and popping out of my mouth of their own accord. I had started out completely stiff with nerves in the presence of my revered Sir Isobe, but before I knew it I was chattering away.

"You are amazing! How do you get all these ideas from just looking at a sketch and an unfinished sample?"

"Um, I don't really know, myself, actually."

"Every one of the ideas you've come up with is so fresh, so inventive, and yet you never lose sight of what the designer had in mind. I wasn't familiar with all of the different stitches you mentioned, but I just know from listening to you that your image of this jumper matches my image of it. This is exciting! This is *so* exciting! Well, you've suggested quite a variety of approaches to doing this, but I think I'm going to leave it to you to decide, if you don't mind. I have complete trust in your judgment."

"But..."

"Basically, just follow the design we have on the sketch. But if you feel that putting the roses in over *here* is cuter than over *there*, I want you to depart from the sketch and just follow your instincts."

"But this job is much too important to leave up to a complete amateur like myself."

"Your ideas and technical skills are a great deal more professional than those of all the needleworkers and other artisans I know, Miss Ryugasaki."

"But..."

"If you're ever in doubt about anything, just give me a call on my cell phone. But if possible, I'd rather have you do this without referring to my judgment. I want to see what you come up with, Miss Ryugasaki. —Oh, that reminds me. I suppose you won't have much time to devote to this with school and everything, but how long do you think it will take you?"

"Well, when do you need it by?"

"The sooner the better, of course."

"May I have three days?"

"What?"

"Even if I take it home with me today, I won't be able to go buy thread until tomorrow."

"You can do it so fast?"

"If it's just this much, yes. I think."

"Well, you don't have to work quite so quickly. I only need to have it here next Saturday afternoon. So please don't strain yourself."

Entrusted with the colored sketch and sample jumper I made my way back to Shimotsuma, all the while thinking hard about what style of embroidery would best achieve the desired effect and at the same time be most typical of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright. By the time I reached Toride, I already knew more

or less which types of thread I would use, and where I would place what size roses using which stitches. The next day I went around to various shops selling needlework supplies, starting at Jusco, but the thread I was looking for was not to be found in Shimotsuma. Some of the shopkeepers said they could order it for me, but it would take at least a week—at which I cursed them inwardly with great bitterness, wishing them a thousand journeys to Hell, and found myself with no choice but to make a trip to Toride, where I found a craft supply store which, while not very large, had all the types of thread I required for my project.

I had decided to embroider the roses using silk ribbon. The safe route would be to use a standard 3.5mm-width ribbon, which would definitely work, but I wanted to give the roses a little extra volume so, fully aware of the risks involved, I had chosen to go with a 7mm ribbon as my main material. For the embroidery linking the roses to each other, I had deliberately selected the unassuming chain stitch—but for the thread, I would use DMC Medicis wool so it wouldn't suffer by comparison to the ribbon roses. I had plenty of time, so I went over and over my design to the point of tediousness, and then very gingerly commenced stitching. When I was almost finished, I was suddenly seized with an almost compulsive desire to strew it with small pearl-like beads in selected areas, so I did—and the result was that an exceedingly subtle sense of classiness was imparted to the entire outfit.

The project had taken me three days to complete, so there were still a few days left until the promised Saturday. I telephoned Sir Isobe to say I had finished the work and wanted him to check it, but he responded that he was going away to purchase fabrics and would be out of town until Saturday, so while he was grateful I had finished it early, he would not be able to see it until then. My work was perfect—but until it met

with Sir Isobe's approval, I was on tenterhooks.

Afraid to go alone bearing the jumper to Baby, the Stars Shine Bright that Saturday, I asked Ichigo to accompany me. "Man, you can't do anything by yourself, can you?" she groused, like I was her kid sister or something, but she agreed to come with me to Ebisu. We took the ten o'clock train. I had intended to leave Shimotsuma around noon, after school got out, but Ichigo had a Ponytails meeting at seven p.m. that Saturday and needed to be back by then, so I played hooky and we left in the morning. Ichigo showed up wearing black extra-extra-long knickerbockers with a bizarre aloha shirt she had purchased from me, which had Versace symbols scattered all over it, and over that, her kamikaze coat. With this embarrassment of a companion in tow, I arrived at the offices in Ebisu in the early afternoon. Sir Isobe greeted us smilingly, and when he saw the embroidery on the front of Ichigo's kamikaze coat, said, "This was done by Miss Ryugasaki, wasn't it?"

"That's right. Momoko's the one who put this awesomely kick-ass writing in for me," responded Ichigo, boasting for some reason.

"So let's see what you've done for *me*."

My heart thudding, I pulled the jumper out of the pink Baby, the Stars Shine Bright bag I had brought it in, and handed it to Sir Isobe. He spread it out and examined it, his face stern. Then, harshly, he barked, "Hey! Bring me a dummy."

Sir Isobe fitted the jumper onto the dummy himself, used both hands to adjust the volume of the skirt, stared avidly at the embroidery, then checked the underside, that is, the back of the embroidery as well. Still silent, he stepped back and gazed at the jumper from a slight distance and then circled around it one time. Upon returning to the front of it he reached out and felt the embroidery with his fingers, then sat down and raked his hands through his hair. He doesn't like it—I could barely

keep from bolting, so great was my anguish at disappointing him. When he eventually spoke, he kept his back to me and his voice was just a murmur.

"I had some doubts, or should I say, fears. Because even if someone can draw really well, for example—even if they're tremendously talented, some people can only draw for themselves while others can draw for a wider audience. If you commission the first type to draw you something, the work they turn in is intrinsically great, but it doesn't *speak* to others, that is to say, to customers. So *my* worry was...totally unfounded! This is brilliant. This is better than I ever imagined. It's not just that both the quality of the work *and* the design are excellent—this embroidery is simply brimming with love for the clothing. It gives joy to everyone who sees it or wears it."

Sir Isobe jumped to his feet and shouted for all the staff in the office to come over.

"Look at this! We may not be able to offer it for sale, but this jumper is *everything* that Baby, the Stars Shine Bright wants to say this fall. I just about lost all hope when it came back from the factory, but thanks to Miss Ryugasaki here, who put in this beautifully creative embroidery, the sample is now complete!"

The room broke out in applause. I got all flustered and kept ducking my head like a bobbing-head doll.

"We're taking this over to Harajuku now for a photo session. If you have the time, why don't you come along?"

"Is that for the magazine ad you were talking about?"

"Yes. We've booked the studio from three o'clock. The model and the make-up artist should be getting there pretty soon."

"But if you didn't like my work, you would have had to cancel the shoot."

"I was ninety-five percent positive I'd love it, so I decided to have everything ready. Plus, today was the only day that worked for both the model and the make-up person."

"But then it would've been safer to have me bring it to you earlier."

"Well, it was such a sudden request. And I didn't want to rush you—I wanted you to spend as much time on it as you could. Remember how I said I had complete trust in you the other day? So if you had brought me badly done work, or called me to say you couldn't finish it by Saturday after all, I wouldn't have blamed *you* for it. I was the one who left it up to you, so the responsibility lay with me."

"Boss? Everything besides the jumper has been loaded," a male employee said briskly.

"Great, then take the jumper and go ahead to the studio. I'll be right behind you. Come, let's go."

Sir Isobe himself drove us to the studio, which was on Meiji Avenue in Harajuku. A Rococoesque chair with carved legs and Gobelin upholstery had been placed in the middle of it. Besides Baby, the Stars Shine Bright staff, there were other people such as the photographer, make-up artist, and their assistants, who were busily and wordlessly going about their preparations.

"The model isn't here yet?" Sir Isobe asked one of his staff.

"Her manager just called and said they had a problem in the car while they were heading over, so they'd be a little late."

"A problem? What kind of problem?"

"He didn't say...but he seemed really upset. He did say they'd be here by a quarter past at the latest, though."

Just as the hands of the clock were slipping past the quarter mark, we heard a loud "Very sorry!" and a man in a blue suit who looked to be a fairly-new-to-the-job manager entered with a young girl. The girl had a patch over her left eye.

"*Why* is she wearing an eye patch?!"

The man in the blue suit answered Sir Isobe's question nervously, looking as if he might burst into tears any moment.

"I'm terribly sorry. We were heading over here when I

noticed her left eye was slightly bloodshot. So I handed her some eye drops to get rid of it, but right after she used it she started screaming that her eye hurt. When I looked at the bottle I'd given her, it turned out not to be eye drops at all, but the wart remover I carry around."

"What kind of a moron are you?!"

"I'm very sorry."

"I hope you took her to an ophthalmologist."

"I tried to, but it's Saturday and there weren't any clinics open on the way here. So we stopped at a drugstore and they let us flush her eye out there, and we bought the eye patch..."

Sir Isobe turned to the model.

"Does it hurt?"

"It feels a little scratchy, sort of..."

"Can you remove the patch?"

"Yes."

It was horrible. She had fine, well-balanced features like a Eurasian's, but her left eye was red and swollen, and puffed up to double the size of her right eye. Under the bad eye the skin was bluish and bruised-looking.

"Maybe you could touch up the photos digitally to get rid of..."

"I *don't* think that's the issue! A model's face and figure are her bread and butter, for god's sake. Of course it *may* be possible to touch up the photos digitally, but how long is this shoot going to take? She's going to be under harsh lights the whole time. You just rinse her eye without taking her to a proper doctor and bring her to work in these conditions—what're you going to do if the damage turns out to be irreversible? I am *not* using this model. I *cannot* use this model. So you just hurry off and find a big hospital that's open, and get her eye looked at."

"I'm sorry..." the girl apologized to Sir Isobe.

"This wasn't *your* fault, it was your manager's fault. I'm going

to ask you to model for me again next time, so don't worry about us and just go get your eye treated. We'll manage somehow."

Sir Isobe sent the model and her manager away, then angrily screamed "Wart remover?!" and collapsed into a chair, clutching his head in his hands. Then he looked up at all the staff standing anxiously around him, suddenly bereft of activity now that the model was gone, and gazed back at each one pleadingly. —And then abruptly, he stood up and pointed a finger at Ichigo.

"You! I'm sorry, but could you be our model today?"

"Who, me?"

Ichigo's mouth was hanging open. My mouth was hanging open. Had Sir Isobe, in this moment of extreme desperation, become delusional? How could he even imagine that this ultra-Yanki would look good in Baby, the Stars Shine Bright?

Sir Isobe dragged Ichigo over to the make-up person and started talking to her rapidly, keeping his eyes on Ichigo's face all the while.

"Look at her face. You don't notice it right away because of the bleached blond hair and the weird old-timey Yanki make-up, but see how she's got really even, well-defined features? The eyes are large. Her eyebrows are shaved off, but she's got lots of nice long lashes. Plus her skin's so white it's practically porcelain. And just try to ignore this clownish, vulgar lipstick and look at the shape of her mouth. See how it's actually small and sweet? Her hair's pretty long, I'd say long enough to make ringlets. Just give her some colored contact lenses, and I think we could turn her into a European princess."

The make-up person nodded.

"Yeah, we could. She's got a great complexion, really smooth skin, very easy to work with. I could turn her into a totally different person."

"You have color contacts?"

"I'll send someone out for a pair. There are a lot of places that sell them around here."

Sir Isobe addressed Ichigo, who was looking totally stupefied.

"What are your height and measurements?"

"Height's 167. Hell if I know the other stuff."

"Eighty, fifty-six, eighty-three, I'd say." It was the photographer, who had drawn near.

"How can you tell when she's wearing these baggy knickerbockers?"

"Ain't been a cameraman all these years for nothing," he responded with a grin. "I think this girl's gonna work. Let's go with her."

"You want me to put on some frilly-ass outfit like Momoko wears? It ain't gonna suit me," Ichigo protested.

"She's right," I chimed in, my voice rising with every word. "There is no way Ichigo is going to look good in that jumper. I mean, she's a Yanki from head to toe! It just isn't possible!"

"The experts here say it is. Now if you agree to do this, I promise you we'll turn you into a first-class model," Sir Isobe said, looking Ichigo in the eyes, then emphatically added, "Please. You're the only one we can turn to right now."

Ichigo glared slantwise at Sir Isobe, then clicked her tongue with a sharp "Tch!"

"Yeah awright, I'll do it."

"Thank you. You've saved our day," Sir Isobe said, and then turned around. "Okay, let's get her made up!"

The studio burst into a flurry of activity. I grabbed Ichigo's sleeve and dragged her outside.

"Are you sure about this? Are you really okay with it? It's probably going to take a really long time. You might miss your gang meeting."

"Hey, it's cool. They don't need me there to do the meeting.

But this thing gets canceled if I say no, right? Plus, hey, this decides if that frilly-ass outfit you embroidered gets used in an ad or gets dumped because of some wart remover, right? So if they say I can do it, heck, I'll do it. It's not like that Miso-babe-or-whatever-his-name-is dude won me over, okay? I owe you, Momoko, and this way I can pay you back a little."

"But..."

"Relax, girl. Watch me, I'll model your frilly-ass outfit just fine."

Ichigo went back into the studio and holed up in the dressing room with the make-up person. An hour later, the door to the dressing room opened and the make-up artist stuck her head out to call Sir Isobe inside. After a while he emerged and said, "Stand by for fitting," and pointing out one by one the items that had been made ready in a corner of the studio, from the socks to the blouse, he gave detailed instructions to his staff. Eventually, they all followed Sir Isobe into the dressing room, each assistant carrying the item he was responsible for. For thirty minutes more, the dressing room remained a closed chamber.

I was left in the studio with just the photographer and his young assistant.

"What's that girl do?" the photographer asked me.

"She's a Shimotsuma biker chick."

"No, what I meant was, is she a student?"

"Oh. Yes. She's both a Zokki and a high school student."

"She work at all?"

"Yes, in a motorcycle repair shop."

"Huh. Who'da thought it? A diamond in the rough, rolling around in a repair shop..."

Finally the door to the dressing room opened again, and staff scuttled back into the studio. Next to emerge was Sir Isobe, taking his time. And after him, escorted by the make-up per-

son, Ichigo appeared. Mercy, what a transformation had taken place...

A large white headdress was perched on her hair, which was curled into beautiful ringlets. Her eyes were a sparkling blue with the color contacts, and thanks to eyeliner and mascara, huge and almost—well, exactly—like a doll's. Her skin was translucently white and glowing, with the faintest hint of blush on her cheeks. Her lips were colored a pale pink, and there was just a touch of gloss perhaps over the lipstick, to add a slightly grown-up coquettishness to the overall impression of artless innocence. She was wearing a white blouse with princess sleeves and rose lace on the front, and over that the jumper I had embroidered. There were tons of ruffles peeking out from under the skirt. She had on white over-the-knee socks in which her ankles looked amazingly slender, and her feet were in a pair of red Mary Janes which suited her so well as to be positively annoying. She did not look, in any way, shape, or form, like a mentally challenged Yanki from Shimotsuma.

"Man, I love it. Gettin' to be there when the rough stone turns into a gem," the photographer said, his eyes sparkling.

He was right: a pebble had been polished and transformed into a glittering diamond. No, that doesn't quite convey it. A piece of coal had metamorphosed into a diamond. No, even that doesn't do it. Fuel had become jewel, mule had become mouse, Mickey had turned into Daisy, and Goofy had turned into Einstein—we were talking about a transmutation that would even have had Paracelsus foaming at the mouth. The Ichigo standing in front of me dressed in Baby, the Stars Shine Bright was a perfect, flawless, absolute Lolita.

"Great, now come over here and stand next to this chair."

Ichigo went and stood next to the chair, which was placed on a long sheet of pink paper that hung from the ceiling. A Baby employee gave her a lacy white purse to hold. The lights were

turned on, and the photographer's assistant raced over to Ichigo and held out a black device like a remote control and pushed the button on it. There was a flash, and he said, "Three and a half."

"Great, let's take some polaroids."

The photographer took the polaroids over to Sir Isobe and together they hunched over them, discussing something in low tones. Finally Sir Isobe nodded vigorously, and the photographer raised his voice, saying, "Okay, let's do it!" The make-up person scurried over to Ichigo, fixed her face and hair, and picked lint off of her clothes with a piece of adhesive tape.

When the make-up person said "She's ready to go" and retreated to the sidelines, the photographer addressed Ichigo.

"Look over this way."

Ichigo held her body at an angle to the camera, folded her arms in front of her chest, drew her chin in as far as it would go, furrowed her brow, and glared at the camera as if challenging it to a fight.

"Okay, that's not quite the pose and expression we're looking for today," the photographer said lightly, and started giving Ichigo instructions such as "Lean over the chair a little," or "Raise your chin just a tiny bit," while rapidly clicking the shutter. "Get me a new roll. Good, that's great. I love it. Okay, now look away and—great, yeah, open your mouth a little, perfect, I love it. Now stay just like that but look over at the camera, yeah, now lean forward, right there, perfect, you're doing great, okay! Let's just take one more roll and it's a wrap."

Ichigo did exactly as the photographer said and struck pose after pose, looking for all the world like she'd been doing this for years. The atmosphere in the studio quietly grew more and more charged. When the photographer finally said "Okay, one last one and we're done!" and pushed the shutter, the soft sound of the film automatically winding back echoed through

the studio, and in that instant the almost sacred mood that had built up on set changed color, from a pure white to something cloudier.

"It's a wrap! You did a great job."

"That was a great job."

"Great job."

As everyone chimed in with "great job," Ichigo slumped down into the chair beside her. Eventually the make-up artist went over and the two of them disappeared into the dressing room. After a while, Ichigo came out in her usual Yanki outfit of knickerbockers and kamikaze coat—but her hair had been fixed rigidly in place with hairspray and was still in ringlets. The combination of ringlets with kamikaze coat was so incongruous as to go beyond strange, silly, or kooky and look like a bold new fashion statement.

"Gotta say, these clothes feel way better on me than those frilly-ass, uh, I mean, Lolita duds."

"Oh, but you looked so much cuter in Baby's clothes than in your Yanki outfits."

"You wear girly-girl stuff like that, you can't get psyched. Still, though, getting my hair all done up like a princess and being all dressed up like that and all, I think I kinda got why you're so nuts about the Lolita thing. It was kinda fun."

When we finally left the studio, it was already past seven in the evening. Sir Isobe invited us to join him and the rest of the staff for dinner, but I wanted to take the opportunity of being in Harajuku to go to Laforet Harajuku, so I gratefully accepted the thought only and said good-bye, taking Ichigo with me.

"You sure you don't wanna go have dinner with him? I mean, shit, I thought you were crazy about Miso-babe or whatever his name is."

"It's okay. Thank you so much for everything today, Ichigo. I'm just so happy that you agreed to model the jumper, and

that you carried it off so adorably."

"So I managed to pay you back a little?"

"Oh, you've paid me back in full. With interest."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yes. So now I want to give you something as a way of saying thank you."

"Give me something?"

"You like Honda motorcycles, right?"

"Yeah, I love Honda. Lotsa bikers say it ain't worth riding if it ain't a Kawasaki, but Honda's my favorite. I mean, they're the ones who make the fucking CB400F. So yeah, Honda's great, and Kawasaki's good too, but Yamaha and Suzuki are like, not even in the picture. Those are chick bikes."

And your scooter is what, a macho steed? The words were almost out of my mouth, but I bit my tongue and led Ichigo to the Shinichiro Arakawa boutique inside Laforet Harajuku. Shinichiro Arakawa, a brand based in Tokyo and Paris and creating distinctive clothing with a street feel, had been putting out dual-brand merchandise in collaboration with Honda since 1997 and their Laforet Harajuku store was devoted almost entirely to this dual-brand line. When we arrived in front of the store, with its red facade against which a white Honda logo stood out, Ichigo let out a yell.

"Whoa, what the hell's this store?"

"If you see anything here you like, I'll buy it for you. As a thank-you present."

There were hooded tops, shirts, baseball jackets, and other items, all bearing the Honda logo. Ichigo was practically beside herself with delight. But while the items sported the Honda logo, they were all designed by the up-and-coming fashion designer, Shinichiro Arakawa. Rather than clothes for bikers, they were the kind of things that girls could wear boyishly and look very darling in.

Ichigo selected a black hooded sweatshirt with a red Honda logo on the front. I might have known she would go for something tracksuity. But this particular top, as she would see when she actually wore it, was very stylishly cut and designed. Once it was on, it wouldn't look tough or sharp, but chic and cute. Wondering if Ichigo was capable of understanding this fundamental difference between the Shinichiro Arakawa sweatshirt and ordinary tracksuits, I purchased it and gave it to her as a present. Even if she was going to stay a Yanki, I wanted to make her a little more stylish. I wanted to customize her to my taste bit by bit, without her noticing. Blissfully unaware of my ulterior motives, Ichigo innocently took possession of the dual-brand hooded sweatshirt and appeared to be very pleased indeed.

The ad featuring Ichigo appeared in full color in a fashion magazine that came out days after the shoot. The Ichigo who was pictured there was charming and dignified, the consummate Lolita, sure to captivate every Lolita who saw her. Sir Isobe had sent us copies of the magazine, and as the two of us looked at the ad Ichigo said, "Man, this is fucking embarrassing. Wish I could fucking airbrush it out of existence." But of all the Baby, the Stars Shine Bright advertisements I had ever seen, this one was the loveliest and most perfectly realized. And it was clear to me that this was because Ichigo had served as the model.

About two or three days after the magazine came out, I received a phone call from Sir Isobe.

"The ad's brought a tremendous response, and even though we credited the jumper as a not-for-sale item, we're being

besieged by customers saying they simply have to have it. I just don't know what to do, because frankly, you're the only one who can do that embroidery, Miss Ryugasaki."

"It depends on how many orders. If it isn't such a huge quantity, I can do the same embroidery again for you."

"How about if we made this a limited-edition item and took orders for thirty jumpers only? Would it be possible for you to embroider that many?"

"I think so, yes."

"Then may I ask you to do this? Of course I'll reimburse you for your costs, and pay you for your work as well."

"That isn't necessary."

"I *insist* on it, Miss Ryugasaki. Now there's another thing I'd like to discuss with you. The thing is, I've had phone calls from several magazines saying they want me to introduce them to that Yanki friend of yours, Ichigo. I've also had offers from three leading modeling agencies. She's a little on the short side for runway work, but she's ideal for magazine jobs. I'm afraid that what we can give her for this ad is very little, but if she joins an agency and lands some big jobs, the pay is almost unbelievably good."

"Ichigo, a fashion model? Well, I can't give you an answer until I've asked her, but I don't think she'll agree."

"That's my feeling, too. But if she's willing to give it a shot, I think she'll be quite a hot commodity. So could you at least ask her if she might be interested?"

I promised him I would.

"Oh, and one last important thing to ask you. Have you decided what you are going to do after graduating from high school, Miss Ryugasaki?"

"Not particularly...I suppose I'll go to some college or university somewhere, probably."

"Any plans to attend a fashion institute?"

"Oh. I've never given it any thought."

"I realize you're still in high school, Miss Ryugasaki, and that I'm in no position to tell you anything about what to do with your future—but the thing is, I *really* want you to study fashion. And after that, I'd like to work with you. In fact, what I'd really like is to hire you straight out of high school. We could really use someone with your skills and imagination, and I just know you'd be an immediate asset to us. After all, things like patterning and sewing and so on, you could learn on the job. But if you think you'd like to study them in school first, or feel you should get a university degree, I'd be willing to wait."

"Thank you very much, but I think you give me more credit than I deserve. And, well, I truly haven't given any thought yet to my future, at all. I'm sorry."

"Oh no, I knew I'd be putting you in a difficult position by springing something like this on you out of the blue. I certainly didn't expect you to give me an answer right away, and you can just go ahead and forget it for the time being. But if you ever decide you *would* like to work here with us, don't hesitate to let me know. I'll *always* save a place for you here, Miss Ryugasaki. You just have to say the word."

I called Ichigo right after getting off the phone with Sir Isobe, in spite of my doubts.

"What, me, model again? Get the fuck outta here. But the pay's real good, huh? Well, I'd never do it for real, but if it's just once in a while, sure, if I have the time."

After that, Ichigo began modeling for fashion magazines every now and then. She chose to work freelance, as joining an agency would mean having to take jobs she didn't want to do, so I found myself taking on the role of Ichigo's manager. Her priorities were the Ponytails first and her job at the Tsuchiura workshop second, and I was only allowed to slot modeling jobs in between those. As for school...Ichigo didn't seem to care if

she had to repeat a grade, so long as she managed to graduate at some point in time.

It was sometime after Ichigo had started gracing the pages of fashion magazines quite a lot. I was having tea with her at the Forest of the Nobility when her cell phone rang, to the tune of Yutaka Ozaki's "Juugo no Yoru." His best-known song, it describes the feelings of a deplorable fifteen-year-old kid who races around all night on a stolen motorcycle.

"Yeah, this is Ichiko...Modeling? Yeah, every once in a while...That's not true. The Ponytails always come first. I only take modeling jobs on the side, when I got nothing else. I don't ever plan to do it full-time...What's so dishonorable about it? It messes with team discipline?...Momoko has nothing to do with it...Draw the line. What for?...All right. If that's going to settle it, I'll draw the line. The graveyard behind the Ushiku Buddha, two o'clock tomorrow. Fine."

"What is it?"

"Aw, nothin'."

"That didn't sound like nothing to me. That was someone from the Ponytails, right? They don't like it that you started modeling? What does it mean to draw the line?"

"You got nothin' to do with this, okay?"

Ichigo rested her cheek on her hand and looked out the window, her face pensive.

"See, the reason I wanted to join the Ponytails in the first place was cuz they were so cool. Totally hard-core bikers. Only into riding, but if someone wants a fight, give it back to 'em double. Strongest girl gang in Shimotsuma. That's how they were when Akimi-san was in charge. But shit, I don't know what happened, but ever since Akimi-san graduated, I don't know, ever since she left it's been different. Like, something's changed.

"Our new boss, Miko, was the oldest member after Akimi-san. But she's, like, the moment she takes over she suddenly says

we're merging with the Tsuchiura chicks. We've been around longer so our name's still the Ponytails, so it's more like we swallowed them, but still. Like, they had more members than us, so Miko's the boss, but they worked it out so the Tsuchiura boss became second-in-command, and the head of our fight squad's a Tsuchiura member now, you know, so nobody's feelings get hurt. But you ask me, that's what fucked things up.

"So okay, the team's a lot bigger now. The Ponytails're, like, the strongest girl gang in all of Ibaraki now. But I'm like, what's so great about being bigger? I loved it when it was just the seven of us, riding around. It was fun. And when that went down to six cuz Akimi-san left, I didn't think that made us weaker or smaller or anything. Now it's like, everyone's all pretending to be buddies and shit, but actually what it is, there's two cliques, Shimotsuma and Tsuchiura, and it's a total power struggle under the surface. Like, who's gonna control the gang? So discipline's a lot tougher now, and I admit that's strengthened team solidarity, but it's a fucking pain in the ass. And like, the other day, Anna—she used to be our fight squad leader before—she went out alone and thrashed this small Shimotsuma girl gang and made them say they'd join the Ponytails. Guess she wanted to show the Tsuchiura crew what a tough shit she was. I mean, Anna would never have done something like that before. She would've thrashed 'em, maybe, but she'd never have made them join us."

It sure was tough being a biker, I realized as I listened to Ichigo's story and saw her glum expression.

"I think I might quit the gang."

"How come?"

"I don't know, the politics. Being in a big group. I don't really know how to explain it, but it's a fucking pain in the ass. I don't even get what I've got to draw the line about, but if I do it and they tell me to get my ass out of there, I will. And I'll just fuck-

ing ride around by myself. Cuz you don't need a team to be a biker—all you need's a bike."

The next day, I started dressing myself a little past noon. I was going to Baby, the Stars Shine Bright for a meeting about the thirty jumpers I would embroider, and I wanted to be in maximum Lolita mode. The meeting was in the early evening, so I would have plenty of time to get there even starting at this hour. I put on an ivory blouse with a rounded collar, a circular bib and lots and lots of rose lace and crown lace on it, and over that a pink jumper of all-over lace in a refined flower pattern, with a pleated skirt that had a triple row of frills in the back and a large ribbon threaded through it on the bodice. Underneath that I wore a white, extremely ruffly crinoline that was slightly long, so that its hem would peek out below the hem of the jumper—a trick beloved of advanced petticoat aficionados. The knee socks I chose were white, with a ribbon threaded through the top to adjust the frills on it, and on my head I donned a straw headdress with a white ribbon on it.

Grandmother came in to say lunch was ready, so I went to join her and the Loser at the table. It was the first time in ages that I was sharing a meal with the Loser.

"So how's it goin'?" asked the Loser, resorting to this utterly meaningless yet stock phrase for use with daughters one has hardly spoken to recently.

"Oh, how about yourself?"

"Well, summer's just about here, so the *tekiya* business is gonna be keeping me real busy. You got any idea how many festivals and fireworks shows they got planned, just in Ibaraki?"

"No."

"Well, Ibaraki's kind of a strange place. Man, these people sure love festivals. I mean, you know how usually a summer festival's tacked on to a shrine ceremony or something, like it's

there to liven things up and get more people to come? Well, not in Ibaraki. These people will use *any* excuse to hold a festival. Like, the time of year daffodils're blooming, they have this festival called 'Daffodil Fantasy.' Then in May, just cuz people fly carp streamers for Boys' Day, they got a Carp Streamer Festival. Come trout season, they gotta hold a Trout Festival. I mean, these people like to celebrate. They go and hold festivals even when they got nothing to celebrate in the first place. And anytime they got a festival somewhere, Yanki from all over Ibaraki show up and go nuts."

"Yanki like festivals?"

"Oh, yeah. Don't ask me why, but Yanki all over the whole country just love festivals, since way back. Once in a while they'll say on the news how young folks these days ain't interested in that stuff anymore, so the only people they can find to carry portable shrines at festivals are old folks, but that's a bunch of crap. Yanki ain't got a religious bone in their bodies, and they ain't even parishioners or anything, but they'll practically fight each other to carry those portable shrines."

"Hm. I almost forgot, you used to be a Yanki yourself."

"Sure was."

"Hey, when Bosozoku 'draw the line' about something, what exactly does that mean? What do they do?"

"Well now, bikers these days might do things different from bikers in my time. And, anyhow, there's all kinds of ways of drawing the line. Like, in the yakuza world, if someone really blows it, the standard way they 'draw the line' is with a pinkie-chop."

The Loser sliced his right hand against the little finger of his left hand, miming its removal (listen to him, coolly giving this matter-of-fact explanation like he hadn't gone to pieces and peed his pants when about to experience the pinkie-chop himself).

"What about among bikers, when someone broke team

discipline rules or something? Is there a standard way of drawing the line there?"

"Well, bikers don't chop off people's fingers. I guess the basic punishment is your gang lynching. Like, they'll chain your wrists together and hook the ends of the chain to the backs of two motorcycles, so you get dragged along the ground when the bikes take off. But hell, there's all kinds of lynchings, from pretty brutal stuff like that to softer stuff, like you might get off easy with just a Seven Star roast or something. Y'know, where they stub some cigarettes out on you."

Ichigo had said she would have to "draw the line." In other words, she was going to be lynched. I didn't know exactly how she would be lynched, whether she would get away with a Seven Star roast or with cooking a three-star pot roast. But from what I'd heard about the current nature of the Ponytails, I did not think that "drawing the line" meant you could just cook a pot roast and that would settle matters—you'd probably have to make roast beef and roast chicken as well. I looked at the time and saw it was one o'clock. Ichigo had said this was her problem, and I had nothing to do with it. Certainly it was true that if modeling had put Ichigo in this situation and she had to "draw the line" for that reason, even though I had been the one who originally got her into modeling, I bore no responsibility for her present predicament. If I did feel responsible for it, Ichigo would no doubt be angry with me for that. She and I inhabited different worlds, and we had managed to maintain our strange friendship by staying out of each other's domains, even while making fun of them.

When I finished my lunch, I tried to get back to my leisurely preparations for visiting Baby. But something was eating away at me, and I just could not keep my mind on it. I kept looking at the clock. The graveyard behind the Ushiku Buddha at two o'clock—is what Ichigo had said. I called Baby, the Stars Shine

Bright, had them put Sir Isobe on the line, asked him to move the meeting to another day, and went outside.

The Loser was out in the yard at his balloon-fishing tub, practicing the art of filling the little balloons with a mixture of air and water. The blown-up balloons were piled into the front basket of Grandmother's Viva You scooter.

"Hey, Dad? How do you get from here to the Ushiku Buddha?"

"I guess the closest station would be Ushiku on the Joban line. I'm pretty sure there's a bus out to the Buddha from there, yeah. It's like a half-hour ride."

If that's how it was, I'd never get there by two o'clock.

"If you take the 294 there out to Route 125 and then just head straight out past Tsuchiura to Kasumigaura, and turn right at Amizakashita, you'll come smack to that giant Buddha."

It was Grandmother.

"I don't know what it is, but I'm guessing it's that friend of yours. She's in trouble, isn't she? Well, there's times a woman's just got to fight, even if she knows it's a losing battle. Here, take this."

Grandmother pressed the key to the Viva You scooter into my hand.

"This is how you start the engine, see? You turn the handle like this to get it moving, and this is how you brake. It's easier than riding a bicycle."

"I'll take it."

I jumped onto the Viva You scooter and turned the key in the ignition. It was the first time I'd ever driven anything. My knowledge of traffic regulations was practically nil—I knew that a red light meant "stop" and a green light meant "go," but I had no idea of how to use the blinker or anything else. Still, I had no choice but to take this scooter down Route 125. It was frightening, but I kept accelerating faster and faster.

Even going at top speed, it would take a considerable amount of time to reach the Ushiku Buddha. I had to get there as soon as I possibly could. Was that so I could rescue Ichigo? No, it wasn't. I was going to where Ichigo was for me, myself. After all, what was I going to do once I got there, weakling that I am? But I didn't have the wherewithal to think about that now.

Every time I cranked up the speed, the wind resistance grew stronger and I had to drive with my head bent forward to prevent my headdress from blowing off. I came to a red light. No pedestrians, so I just ignored it. As I hurtled past the car in front of me, the driver leaned on his horn. Maybe my manner of overtaking left something to be desired. Or perhaps he was just warning me about my lack of a helmet or my egregious disregard for the speed limit. *Well, I don't have the time to be sticking to the speed limit, all right? I'm in a goddamn hurry, so shut the fuck up, asshole.*

—Just don't die, Ichigo. You die, I'm gonna fucking kill you, bitch. I don't see that goddamn Ushiku Buddha yet—where the hell is it? Can't you go any faster, you pathetic scooter, you? I don't care if your engine burns out, just get me to that fucking Buddha. You're a Honda fer fuck's sake, so act like one and haul some ass! And don't think I'm gonna slow down for any curves, you lazy motherfucker. Hustle, will ya? Let's make some goddamn tracks!

Oh dear, consorting with a delinquent like Ichigo has made my language get rather rough recently. Tut, tut. Oh, I've reached Tsuchiura. I'm supposed to keep going straight, I believe. *Run, scooter! Your friend believes in you and awaits you even now at the gallows, her life held hostage to yours. It's hopeless, time is running out. No, the sun has not yet set. Wait for me, oh childhood friend of mine, Selinuntius!* Oops, this is straight out of Dazai's *Run, Melos*. Well, I can't have that. I mean to say, it's good that Melos manages to reach the gallows in the nick of time to save his friend, but during his desperate race to get

there he loses most of his clothes and arrives virtually buck-naked.

I reached the lakefront road along Kasumigaura, so pretty soon I would have to make a right turn at Amizakashita. There it was, at that light—there was a sign saying "Ushiku Buddha." I swerved abruptly to the right, and the scooter rose into the air for a moment. The driver of the car behind me, apparently taken by surprise at my sudden change of course, seemed to have collided with something because I heard a huge crashing sound. But I managed to complete my change of course (miraculously) and plunge into the road leading to the Ushiku Buddha. There it was, I saw it—the most colossal Buddha anyone could possibly imagine. So now I just had to go around to the back of it. *Come on, Viva You scooter, we're almost there—let's hear that long-ass muffler roar! Blast off, baby!*—Oops, it wasn't souped-up so the muffler wasn't extended (so it wasn't going to make a blasting sound, either).

I reached the road encircling the cemetery that spread out behind the Ushiku Buddha. It was totally deserted. As I was speeding along, I suddenly spied a congregation of super-customized motorcycles and also very customized—so to speak—people. That had to be where Ichigo was—I slammed on the brakes, intending to come to a halt outside the throng, but I seemed to have hit the brakes a little too hard, for I kept going and fell over, scooter and all. Black smoke rose from the engine.

"Momoko! What the fuck are you doing here?!"

Ichigo was surrounded by something like thirty biker chicks, each one of them incrediby scary-looking in her own special way.

"So you got yourself some back-up, huh? What a beautiful friendship—makes me wanna cry," said a masked blonde in a black kamikaze coat.

"She ain't got nothin' to do with this. Momoko, get the fuck outta here."

"Oh, I just happened to pass by here, by complete chance."

"Goddamn it, Momoko. You think anyone's gonna believe that when you show up like a bat outta hell on a fucking scooter you can't even drive? They all know you live in Shimotsuma."

"That's her, Miko," a fat biker chick in a red kamikaze coat said to a woman standing in the middle of the group, who had long black hair. She wore black sunglasses, a purple kamikaze coat, and purple lipstick. "This weird-looking little kid here's the one Ichiko's hanging out with all the time these days. They been going around busting all the pachinko places in town, and she's the one who gets Ichiko her modeling gigs."

"That so? Then let's let her stick around and watch Ichiko drawing the line. Show her what biker justice looks like."

So this black-haired chick was the Ponytails' new boss, Miko.

"If you want me to draw the line, Miko, I'll do it. But I don't even know what I'm drawing the line *about*. How am I supposed to draw the line, when I don't get what it's all about?"

"You're fucking up team discipline, bitch. You think gettin' dressed up in girly-ass outfits for fashion mags is something a strictly hard-core biker chick oughta be doing? Huh?"

"Modeling messes with team discipline? Miki of the Skeletons in *High-Teen Boogie* was a biker, and she modeled on the side."

"Well, that's a fucking manga and this is real life, all right? Look, you know we're all pulling our shit together to unify all the chicks' teams in Ibaraki right now. Well, you've been a Ponytail since the Shimotsuma days. You're the fucking old guard, Ichiko. You don't set a goddamn example, discipline falls apart, all right? How's it gonna look to the Tsuchiura crew if I let you do whatever the hell you want?"

"Well, I always put the team first and my job at the bike repair shop second. I only do the modeling when I got some time in between. I've been drawing a clear line, Miko."

"So how come you blew off a gang meeting that one time? You never told anyone you weren't gonna show up. What the hell were you doin' that time, huh? Don't lie and say you weren't modeling, you fucking bitch, cuz I know!"

"But that was..."

"I ain't got time for your lame excuses, Ichiko."

Ichigo pressed her lips together.

"Why did the Ponytails have to get like this after Akimi-san left, Miko? How come we had to do stuff like merge with Tsuchiura and crush the smaller Shimotsuma teams? What was wrong with staying the way we were?"

"Times change, Ichiko. Sure it was fun when there was just seven of us, calling ourselves the strongest gang in Shimotsuma and riding around town like we used to. But we gotta get with the times. There ain't no going back anymore—Ibaraki's gotta unite. That ain't my own personal decision, all right? It's a direct command from Himiko herself."

"Himiko herself...?"

"You know who I'm talkin' about. *That* Himiko. She called me and the head of the Tsuchiura team and ordered us to unify Ibaraki."

"Hmph. So what are you, Miko, Himiko's fucking puppet?"

Ichigo's tone and language were suddenly defiant.

"Watch your fucking mouth, bitch. How d'you think you got where you are, you little scooter-riding half-ass punk? Cuz me and the rest of the Ponytails showed you the ropes, that's how. Hell, you've only *been* a Yanki for a couple years, kid, and don't you forget it."

"I appreciate what you've done for me, Miko. But I'll tell you this: if you're just a fucking puppet now, I don't respect you any-

more. I mean, shit. Why'd you think we all wanted to be bikers? Cuz we wanted to get the fuck out of the goddamn system, that's why. Cuz school and everything else with all their stupid rules are a fucking drag, that's why. Cuz nobody ever listens to us, and just gives us shit all the time, and tries to shove that crap about rules and manners and decency down our throats when they're all just a bunch of fucking hypocrites. We wanted to get away from all that crap. The Ponytails were a bunch of stray cats that wound up together after saying 'fuck you' to all that bullshit. And now look at you. Someone tells you to jump, you say how high. They give you an order, you don't ask any questions and just do what they tell you. Well, that sounds a helluva lot like what we were trying to get away from."

"Yeah, well things change when you get bigger, all right? It's not just about what *you* want anymore, it's about what the whole team wants. You gotta toe the fucking line sometimes. It's called growing up, Ichiko."

"If growing up means selling out on everything you believe in, then I'll just stay a kid. Make the Ponytails as big as you want, I don't give a shit. I'll just ride by myself."

"You think we're gonna let you get away with that? You don't dis your friends, Ichiko, and expect 'em to take it lying down. Look, you draw the line here in front of everybody and quit that modeling crap, we can go back to having a good time like we used to. Or what, you tryin' to tell me you're gonna double-cross us after everything we been through together, and keep hanging out with that frilly-fuck kid there? What's it gonna be, Ichiko—all of us who've been your buddies and looked out for you all this time, or your new little pal? You wanna stay with the Ponytails, or go with her? Cuz it's one or the other, bitch."

Ichigo's eyes were gleaming like a hungry wolf's. Without flinching for a moment at Miko's threats, she stuck her hands

into the pockets of her kamikaze coat, drew out her Zippo lighter and a pack of Seven Stars, and lit a cigarette.

"This 'frilly-fuck' here is called a Lolita, all right? Try to remember that. You got no problem being called a Yanki or a Zokki, but it pisses you off if someone calls you 'one of those people who can't read the character for *whore* but likes to use a lot of hard kanji,' right?"

Hey, you were calling me "frilly-ass" yourself all the time until just recently—Well, let it go.

"Momoko here ain't my friend, see? I kept saying we were buds, but she never did. She never wanted to be friends with me. And you know what? I just figured out why. You all wanna be friends all the time. You all wanna be part of a group. But that's just cuz you're afraid to be alone, ain't it? You're scared to be alone so you want somebody there beside you. That's all it is. And then you keep telling each other what great buddies you are to make yourselves feel better. It's fucking pitiful. And then if one of those buddies of yours gets involved in something you don't know a whole lot about, or starts hanging out with someone who's different from you, you start screaming about 'dissing' and 'double-crossing' and stuff like a bunch of babies. Momoko here's always alone, see? She don't listen to nobody. She just lives by her own fucking rules. She's in a whole different league from you chickenshits, who can't even cross the street without your buddies around to hold your hands."

"I trusted you, Ichiko. And now you're gonna stab us in the back and pick *her*?"

"Yeah, I'll stab you in the back. You don't wanna get double-crossed, don't trust people, all right? You afraid to get hurt, don't believe in anybody. You're just scared to be alone, so you're always holding each other's hands and talking about loyalty and solidarity and shit, and ganging up on people with your discipline and justice and stuff so you can feel like your

shallow-ass friendship means something. Well, if that's what your friendship's all about, I don't want it."

"So you're quitting the team."

"Hell yeah, I'm quitting the team. I don't need to be a part of this buddy-buddy support group. Cuz when you get down to it, I'm on my own anyway. We all are. You can stay up all night talking and hugging each other and shit, but when you go to sleep you all have different dreams. And that's why you can think someone's cool, and care about them, and respect what they're all about—*because* they're different from you.

"...Momoko was there for me when I was going through a really rough time. She stayed right there beside me, but she didn't say a word. If it was you guys, you'da tried to comfort me with all the usual shit. But you wouldn't be sayin' that stuff for *me*, you'd be saying it for yourself. It'd be all about proving what a great friend you are, and how you care so much about me, so when *you* need someone you could count on me. Well, if counting's what you're into, pay attention in fucking math class. Go to college and study economics. She knows, see? She knows you can't really share someone else's pain or suffering, no matter how hard you try. She knows they gotta deal with it on their own."

"That all you wanted to say?"

"Yeah. I got nothing more to say to you herd of sheep."

"Well, if you're quitting, go ahead. But you gotta draw the line about that first."

"Draw the line. That all you can talk about? It don't matter if there's a good reason or not, does it—you just want me to draw the line, period. Why is that? Well, I'll tell you why. Cuz if I don't draw the line here, everyone's gonna start questioning your strength as a leader and make *you* draw the line. You're just a fucking chickenshit, Miko. You're just a pathetic scaredy-cat, so you gotta be part of a pack. Well, I ain't drawing no line.

Cuz I got no reason to."

"Fine, bitch. If you can't draw the line yourself, then I guess I'll just have to draw it for you."

"Go right ahead. I'll take you on anytime, Miko. One-on-one, barehanded. How about it?"

Ichigo threw off her kamikaze coat and crouched into the phony kung fu pose that had served her so well in her maiden fight. The crowd drew back into a circle, leaving just Ichigo and Miko in the center.

"You think you got a chance in hell against me, you little bitch?"

"I think I'm gonna whip your ass, Miko."

"Dream on, fuckface."

Miko lashed out with a kick. Ichigo dodged it, then grabbed the outflung leg and yanked it up high, landing a vicious headbutt as her opponent was thrown off balance. She kept hold of the leg as Miko crashed down, then straddled her and twisted the leg up and out at an unnatural angle. Ichigo had a crushing advantage. The fight was all but over. But the next moment, metal baseball bats came swinging down on her back and side—two Tsuchiura members had launched a sudden attack. Ichigo let go of Miko's leg and rolled onto the ground, but she managed to get to her feet right away, holding her side.

"This was a one-on-one fight, you dirty lowdown motherfuckers."

"You don't get it, bitch. We ain't here for a fight, we're here to make you draw the line."

"That's right. The boss might've gone easy on you for old times' sake, but to us you ain't nothin' but a traitor. See, we ain't all nice and polite like you Shimotsuma chicks. Tsuchiura justice is rough, tough, and mean—and we kill traitors. So get ready to die, fucker."

The two brought their bats down on Ichigo's body, hitting her

mercilessly from every direction. Nevertheless she somehow managed to fall onto one of them, grab her hair, and bite down hard on the arm holding the bat.

"If it's no-rules, anything-goes, foul-play shit you want, you got it."

Ichigo wrested the bat from the one whose arm she'd chomped and swung it around with her right hand while sticking her left hand into her pocket. When it came out, her hand was fitted with brass knuckles. Ichigo set her sights on the one who was now unarmed and gave her back what she'd got with the bat, only several times harder. The rest of the gang, no doubt sensing that two of them alone wouldn't be enough to defeat her, got ready to join the fray. Now she really didn't stand a chance. Even so, Ichigo faced off against them, the bat in her right hand and the brass knuckles on her left. As one of them lunged toward her, Ichigo's left fist smashed into her nose and bright red blood sprayed into the air. Her bat, in mid-swing, cracked into the back of another one's head. But there were too many of them—finally they managed to get her from behind. Struggle as she may, with four of them pinning back her arms and legs she couldn't budge. They took away her bat and brass knuckles, and then everyone, unharmed and injured alike, closed in around her.

"Gimme a razor blade," Miko said to somebody. "No, two razor blades. See, you take two razor blades and stick a ten yen coin between them to make it a double blade. I heard you get slashed with a double blade like that, you're scarred for life. So I'm going to draw the line right across your pretty little face, Ichiko. You ain't never gonna get a modeling gig again."

Ichigo's face was about to receive a wound that would never disappear. *No. No!* I couldn't bear it. I raised the Viva You scooter from the ground and tried to start the engine. It was obvious that if I launched myself at them they'd pinion me

immediately, feeble as I am, so my idea was to charge into their midst on the scooter. If I happened to hit and kill one or two of them, that was just too bad—but wait, there was that black smoke rising from the engine earlier. Yes, the engine seemed to have burnt out. No matter how many times I tried, it simply wouldn't start.

One of them noticed my suspicious behavior. I was in trouble. *Oh Lord, no, Great Buddha of Ushiku, if thou hast any Buddhist compassion thou shalt help this puny girl at your feet and give her strength, amen* I prayed, and even while knowing it was a lost cause I tried with all my might to lift the Viva You scooter off the ground. And...I succeeded. Where on earth had this power come from? When we had to do shot put in gym class, I had only been able to throw it thirty centimeters. But now, I roared "Oryaaaa!" and hurled the scooter at Miko, who stood with the razor blades in her hand. The Viva You scooter hit its target squarely, and knocked down three others who stood beside her for good measure, pinning them all to the ground.

My sudden assault, so completely berserk and blindly disregardful of theory as it was, made the group go tense, and it was clear that they were beginning to eye me warily. But that brute force I had somehow summoned was a miracle—pure hazard. Plus, I had nothing more to hurl at them. Behind me there were rows and rows of gravestones, and if I were to keep pitching those at them I would probably be able to overcome them, but doing something like that would incur the wrath of the Ushiku Buddha. Still, at this moment the enemy was scared, and if I didn't at least bluff my way through I would not be able to rescue Ichigo. Since I didn't want to approach them empty-handed, I scooped up the little balloons the Loser had filled earlier that day, which had spilled out of the scooter's front basket when I had lifted it up. My arms filled with balloons, I slowly moved toward the throng.

"You sorry fucking bitches, you fuck with me and I'll make you regret it."

At times like these, being able to use the Kansai dialect is a great advantage. If you say something like I had just said in the Kansai dialect, speaking very rapidly and expressionlessly but with a slightly menacing tone, most people in the Kanto region will wet their pants.

"Who wants to die first? You?"

I lobbed one of the balloons toward the group, just for effect. It hit one of them and landed near her feet.

"Let's all play dodge-the-balloons, shall we?"

Uttering this meaningless threat I advanced toward them, lobbing balloon after balloon. What was I going to do next? It was just a matter of time before they called my bluff.

"Let her go, ladies. Now. You don't let her go this minute, I'm going to—"

Miko interrupted me, shouting.

"Let her go! Now! Let her go! She's fucking serious!"

The four who had been restraining Ichigo released her, shaking. Ichigo took her Seven Stars and Zippo out of her pocket and slowly lit a cigarette. Then, without extinguishing the flame she walked over to her own bike, keeping her eyes on everyone's faces all the while. She started her engine, then told me to sit on the back seat. When I did, she straddled the seat in front of me.

"So we'll chalk this one up to me and her," she said, looking from the Zippo's flame to Miko's face and back.

"We ain't through yet, Ichiko. You just made an enemy of every biker chick in Ibaraki, bitch. And their leader, Himiko herself."

"Oh, yeah? Well, next time you see Himiko *herself*, tell her this from me—you'll be sorry for this, bitch."

Ichigo snapped her Zippo shut and stuck it back into her

pocket, then hit the clutch. The engine thundered with its usual deafening roar, and Ichigo and I headed out toward Route 125.

"Man, you sure came armed with an awesome fucking weapon, Momoko."

"What awesome weapon?"

"Those balloons."

"Huh?"

"You are one crazy chick, I swear."

"Was it silly?"

"I couldn't believe it. I mean, I couldn't believe it when you threw that scooter, but shit, Momoko—you lose it, you're scary. I mean, you were really ready to kill those guys."

"No I wasn't."

"You kidding me? You use that many balloons, at least a few of them would've died for sure."

"What are you talking about? They were just plain old festival-stall balloons."

"They weren't bombs?"

Ichigo screeched to a stop and turned around to stare at me in amazement.

"So what was in them?"

"Water..."

"No way..."

"What else would it be?"

"Well, way back when Bosozoku were into some really hairy turf wars, the really killer-fighter gangs—well those guys were practically terrorists—they used this weapon called the balloon bomb. It looks just like the balloons you were throwing, but instead of water it's got kerosene or gasoline inside it. You throw one of those and light it—ka-boom!"

"So that's why everyone froze like that."

"I was freaking, okay? I mean, you just kept throwing them right in front of me."

"So if the Ushiku Buddha had turned around then and started shooting fire out of his mouth, everyone would have been even more terrified than they already were."

"Why would the Ushiku Buddha start shooting fire out of its mouth, you fucking dope?"

Ichigo seemed to have no recollection whatsoever of the curse she had desperately conjured to keep Mr. Slick's phone number to herself.

"Forget it. Hey, Ichigo, are you going to be all right? You said you'd ride on your own, but isn't that going to be dicey?"

"I'll be fine. After what happened today, nobody's gonna have the guts to mess with me anymore."

"But that Himiko person's behind them, right?"

"The legendary Himiko, right. She doesn't even fucking exist."

"Huh?"

"Himiko, see, is this imaginary person that I made up. Back when I was in middle school, when I wanted to be a Yanki but was just this total wimp, I used to have these fantasies about this really cool biker chick, who was, like, everything I wanted to be. That was Himiko.

"So one day I wrote this thing pretending to be Himiko, saying I'd graduated once but then when I came out of reform school I'd formed a small gang and unified all the chicks' teams in Kanagawa, blah blah blah, and finally I'd stormed the headquarters of this yakuza gang and destroyed them, but thanks to that the cops were after me so I couldn't tell anybody where I was, but if any biker chicks out there did anything bad, I'd find them and punish them, so watch out—and I sent it in to *Champ Road*. And I was like, as if the editors would ever believe this total teenybopper fantasy, but then, like, it actually appeared in

this spin-off magazine of theirs. I couldn't fucking believe it. But I didn't have the nerve to call them up saying I made the whole thing up, or write them a letter or anything. So I guess people saw it and told their friends about it and stuff, and the Legend of Himiko just kinda kept growing after that."

"What about Himiko's kamikaze coat having embroidery by the Emma master on it?"

"Someone added that later."

"Then why did you tell me about it that time, when you knew it wasn't true or even possible?"

"Cuz you started pissing me off, saying Emma doesn't even exist and shit. And I couldn't think of any other examples."

In my research, the Himiko story had been more or less consistent from the point she left reform school to the point she wiped out the yakuza gang. It was only after that that Himiko's doings had suddenly entered the realm of preposterous urban myth, and now this riddle was solved: up to the yakuza gang's demolition, the story had had an author. There had been a text, so the accounts had been of a piece. As for everything that came after that, the author had gone missing so the story had been embellished by any number of people in any number of ways, each customizing it to his or her own fancy.

"So when Miko said Himiko was behind the Ponytails' expansion, that she was doing it under direct orders from her and stuff, it was like, *ding*! I suddenly saw what it was all about. Like, she's talking about friendship and loyalty and crap, when all she cares about is power."

"You're smarter than you seem, Ichigo."

"Shut the fuck up! So hey, that scooter—that Viva You bike of your grandma's with the fucked-up engine, I feel really bad about that. I'll ask the old man at the garage tomorrow to go over there and get it, okay? I'll fix it up and get it back to you working just fine."

"That's okay. I'll just buy my grandmother a new one."

"No way, girl. Still and all, now I owe you another huge favor, Momoko."

"You don't have to pay it back, you know."

"Yeah. Never pay back what you owe. That's your policy, so I guess I need to respect it. Plus, even if I fixed up the bike and gave it back to you, there's no way I could ever pay you back for hightailing it all the way from Shimotsuma to Ushiku on a bike you didn't even know how to drive. Or for hurling that fucking bike to save my ass. I mean, shit, that stuff's way too much to ever give back. You know, I don't even *want* to give it back. What you did for me today's something I'm gonna keep inside me forever, girl. It's mine now."

Ichigo eased the bike into motion again. Watching the sparkling lake of Kasumigaura from the back seat of Ichigo's tasteless scooter, clutching her waist to keep from falling off as we trundled along at her not-very-fast-at-all maximum velocity, I found myself thinking that this may not be very Rococo, but it wasn't so bad, either.

Hey, Ichigo. I'm pretty sure you'll always stay stupid, and crazy about motorcycles, and when you get out of high school, no matter how hard people try to persuade you to keep modeling or get into show business, no matter how much they tell you about all the money you'll make and all the celebrity you'll enjoy, you'll probably choose to work full-time at that repair shop in Tsuchiura, won't you? As for me, I still don't know what I want to do with myself. I love doing embroidery, and I've learned how rewarding it is to do embroidery for others, but I get the feeling that if I'm on the side that makes the Lolita clothing I love so much, instead of the side that buys it, the thrill I get when I encounter new clothes will fade. And above all, if I start working for Baby, the Stars Shine Bright, I'll have to forfeit my standing as a Baby customer. I think I'd rather stay a pure fan of Baby, the Stars Shine Bright and nothing more.

That seems to me a more luxurious way of life than joining the company and creating Baby, the Stars Shine Bright clothing myself. But there's no need to rush to a decision, is there, Ichigo? After all, I'm still just a kid, and unlike yourself, I am a Lolita. I do not believe in growing up. No matter how old I get, I shall remain devoted to ruffles and frills. That, after all, is what being a Lolita is all about.

A pleasant breeze was blowing across my body. I thought to myself that if Baby, the Stars Shine Bright were to design a scooter like Viva You had done, I'd get a scooter license. It would be an all-white scooter with wings, like something angels would ride, and I'd travel the roads of Shimotsuma on it alongside Ichigo. *Oh, Ichigo. My darling Ichigo. There's so much that I owe you, too. But I'm never paying any of it back—not a smidgen. You're also the one who showed me that growing up might not be such a bad thing after all. Thank you, Ichigo. This is much too embarrassing for me to ever say out loud, but you're the best friend I could ever have.*

Feeling the wind against me I softly laid my head against Ichigo's back, the way I might with a lover.

Afterword

I imagine that quite a few of you picked up this novel after seeing its movie adaptation.

Well, nice to make your acquaintance. I am Novala Takemoto, a Rococo writer who has been racing headlong in full-blown Lolita mode for years, in spite of being a straight male.

Momoko, the girl who tells this story, is pretty much my alter ego. So if you found yourself identifying with Momoko's spirit, it means that I have been understood on the other side of the ocean, and this makes me very happy.

Lolita is a unique form of street fashion that emerged in Japan in the late 1970s. There are no leaders in the Lolita world. I am sometimes introduced as an authority on Lolitas, and enjoy overwhelming support among readers with Lolita tastes, but even so, if my assertions and opinions do not meet with their approval, I face harsh rebuke. Lolitas do not recognize any authority. They follow only the values they have chosen for

themselves, regardless of what anybody might say.

In other words, Lolitas possess a hard-boiled spirit at root that cannot be attained by men today. "Hard-boiled," that stylishly cool attitude that originated among American men, has thus been passed on to a segment of with-it girls in Japan called Lolitas. And it is now being relayed back to girls in America. This may have been inevitable. The reason I have been writing about Lolitas since my debut, in *Kamikaze Girls* and other books, is that the hard-boiled sensibility is the source of my own lifestyle and creativity.

While Lolita is a fashion genre that sprang up spontaneously, it does have strict conventions. Bangs have to be cut straight across in front of the eyebrows, skirts have to be worn over petticoats, and so on. So long as you stick to these basics, the rest is up to you—you are free to adapt the look any way you please, and give precedence to your own original definition of Lolita.

Lolita is a fusion of the spirit of punk rock with formal beauty that honors tradition. Lolitas value independence and beauty above all else.

In *Kamikaze Girls*, the two girls are drawn to each other's independent natures and eventually come to respect one another. Even though their tastes and principles are different, they become bound by true friendship because they learn to respect the aesthetic behind those tastes and principles.

...Right around here, I picked up the Japanese copy of *Kamikaze Girls* that I had placed beside me to write this afterword to the American edition, and reread the last part for the first time in ages. Aah, this speech of Ichigo's is pretty great, isn't it?

The one that starts with, "Momoko here ain't my friend, see?" It brought tears to my eyes. (*Hey, don't read your own stuff and start crying!*)

Actually, though, I was asked to write an afterword to the American edition and I said okay, but you know what? Everything I wanted to say, which is basically the simple message of "let's all get along while following our own paths and doing whatever the hell we want!" is packed right into the book. I don't really think I have anything to add to that at this point. Just connecting with you, who'll be fighting this fight with me from now on, is enough for me.

The sequel to *Kamikaze Girls* has just been published in Japan. This too is a full-tilt story for hard-core girls that even outdoes the first one, so I hope you get to read it soon. I have autograph sessions whenever one of my novels is released, and *sigh*, I sure wish I could go to America to have one for this book. I mean gosh, I want to meet you! Ask me to come!

Oh, I should mention that the brand Baby, the Stars Shine Bright that appears in this novel actually exists. Courtney Love is a fan, apparently, and whenever she visits Japan she goes to Baby, the Stars Shine Bright's main store in Daikanyama to stock up on Lolita clothes.

Novala Takemoto
Tokyo, October 2005

Glossary

Hard-core - *page 70:*

The Japanese *kouha* or literally "hard faction" refers to those who take a hard line, whether in politics or in anything else—purists, dogmatists, straight-and-narrow types. This extends to love (*kouha* do not fool around, but remain strictly true) and general behavior (*kouha* are "strong, silent" types who consider idle chatter and shows of emotion to be "soft" behavior—*kouha* are usually male). In fact, the Japanese word for "cruising," as in picking someone up, is *nanpa* or "soft faction," i.e. the opposite of *kouha*. The Ponytails are "hard-core" bikers, and Ichigo explains what this means to Momoko: no paint thinner or drugs, no shaking people down or bothering regular folks, and no sluts—only riding and fighting.

Kansai - *page 18:*

The name of the region around Osaka, also containing Hyogo, Kyoto, and Nara prefectures. The Kobe-based Yamaguchi-gumi, located in Hyogo prefecture, is Japan's

largest yakuza gang, and movie yakuza tend to speak the Kansai dialect.

Kanto - *page 206:*
The name of the region around Tokyo, including Ibaraki, Saitama, Chiba, Tochigi, Gunma, and Kanagawa prefectures.

"Nameneko" - *page 111:*
Refers to pictures of real kittens dressed up in bad-ass Yanki costumes, with dialog balloons saying "Namennayo" ("Don't fuck with me")—photos of these were a huge hit on posters, T-shirts, and sundry items.

Shizuka Kudo - *page 111:*
The wife of J-Pop heartthrob Takuya Kimura (commonly known as "Kimutaku"), Shizuka Kudo is a former Yanki biker chick turned starlet, actress, singer, and artist who remains very popular among Yanki as "one of their own," as does Naoko Iijima, for the same reason.

Yanki - *page 14:*
Pronounced 'young-KEY' like the Spanish *yanquí*. Ordinary Japanese, i.e. non-Yanki, consider Yanki very scary because of their insolence, hair-trigger tempers, quickness to fight, and their appearance (though this is more typical of the Bosozoku biker gangs, a subgroup of Yanki, than of all Yanki in general). There is debate as to whether the origin of the word, Yankee, comes from their fondness for hair bleach, which far predates its popularity among the general public, or from

a previous generation's fondness for aloha shirts bought in the America-mura quarter in Osaka, but there is agreement that the term originates in Kansai. In Kanto, Yanki used to be called Tsuppari (toughs) or the more general *furyo* (delinquents), but perhaps due to the large number of Osaka Yanki who've made it in show business (television), usually as comedians with the Osaka-based entertainment conglomerate Yoshimoto Kogyo, the term has spread nationwide. Basically, Yanki are working-class rebels with parallels to the British Rockers (vs. the Mods), Oi-boys, and skinheads. The U.S. is less of a class culture, but there might be some parallels to black and Latino street gangs, and also to "white trash." Yanki is strictly a youth culture, though, so you "graduate" when you become an adult at twenty and become an "ex-Yanki" at which point you either get married and get a job in some trade, or become a full-fledged yakuza (Bosozoku gangs are well-known as recruiting grounds for yakuza).

Yokohama Ginbae - *page 111:*

The commonly accepted name for The Crazy Rider Yokohama Ginbae Rolling Special, a band specializing in biker-themed songs. (*Ginbae* means "silver fly.")

"Yo-ro-shi-ku" - *page 111:*

Meaningless in Roman letters, as this common Japanese word, usually written in hiragana and meaning "thank you" or "best regards," is written by the kanji-loving Yanki with the four kanji for night, exposure, death, and suffering—Momoko's keyword was the kanji spelling.

Photo by © ANJU

Novala Takemoto

was born in Uji City, Kyoto, and is an Aquarius. Takemoto's debut novel, *Missin'*, was published in 2000, and he was a candidate for the Yukio Mishima Prize for literature two years in a row with *Emily* in 2003 and *Lolita* in 2004. In addition to *Kamikaze Girls*, Takemoto's other novels include *Uloko Hime*, *Twins*, *A Child Abandoned by Deus*, and *Calps Alpis*. His sequel to *Kamikaze Girls* was published in June of 2005.

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A NOTE ABOUT THE TYPE

Granjon was designed in 1928 for Linotype by George Jones. It is named after the sixteenth-century French printer, publisher, and lettercutter Robert Granjon, who is noted in particular for his beautiful italic typefaces. The roman characters of Granjon were made by Claude Garamond and the italic forms were designed by Robert Granjon.

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